U.S. NEWSPAPERS AND THE ADOPTION OF TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

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In order to survive in a hyper-competitive media marketplace, managers must constantly evaluate new technologies and their potential impact on the industry. Using theories on innovation management in organization, this study examined the processes used by managers at daily newspaper in the U.S. during the time period of 1992-2005 to plan for publishing content online. Fourteen subjects, all of whom held management positions during this time, were interviewed at length about their experiences. Their responses reveal that the processes were generally haphazard. This was a result of several factors, some of which were external to the newspaper industry, and others which were cultural, internal forces. Despite a general level of disorganization in the processes, the responses do identify some practices that can be used as blueprints for media organizations that wish to rethink their approach to potentially disruptive technologies.
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INTRODUCTION

As media companies fight to maintain their positions and survive in an increasingly crowded and competitive ecosystem of information, one of their most formidable challenges is how to effectively manage technological advances or innovations that emerge in the marketplace (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002). Emerging technologies are “science-based innovations that have the potential to create a new industry or transform an existing one” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000). These innovations are classified as “potentially disruptive” (Picard, 2003) for traditional media companies such as newspapers, television networks, radio stations and magazines, because the news media industry is mature and limited in natural growth. New forms of distributing content that arose with the advent of the Internet and World Wide Web in the 1990s and 2000s represented disruptive technology that emerged and upset established media industry markets.

Scholars have identified the media industry as “one of those that was most affected by technological innovation in the 1990s” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000). Managers needed to be able to identify technologies that might be disruptive to their current position, plan for how to respond to the technologies, then implement their plans appropriately (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002). As these changes in communication technologies continue to occur at an ever-faster rate, it has become increasingly more important for media managers to understand the process of “managing emerging technologies” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000) or “managing the diffusion of innovation.” The terms “innovation” and “technology” are used synonymously in this research.

This process of evaluating and ultimately implementing innovation is not an easy one, and it is particularly difficult for those in the media industry because of the stable
position most companies have been operating from for many years, and the speed at which communication technology develops. However, because of the recent “widespread introduction of new communication technologies” (Wood Adams, 2008), research on how organizations can most effectively adopt new innovations is an area of study that has experienced increased interest. From this research, what has emerged are “some processes that firms can use to minimize the risks of new technological adoption,” (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002) while at the same time maximizing “the likelihood that the firm will have a positive outcome from the process” (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002).

Management literature has shown that in many cases, newspaper managers prematurely “make decisions about their adoption of emerging technologies before the effects of those technologies are known” (Bressers, 2006). The present study sought to determine to what degree this was the case starting in 1992 when newspapers first started to experiment with producing online content until 2005, when nearly every daily publication in the country had some level of online presence (Bressers, 2006). A qualitative method was used so that the study could determine not only whether or not the managers used recommended practices and methods, but also why or why not, and how they arrived at the methods they ultimately employed. The interviews sought to identify certain characteristics of publications or managers that made them more or less likely to use the recommended practices for managing innovation, as well as gauge attitudes toward the medium and the industry itself during the years of 1992-2005. Fourteen subjects were interviewed, all of whom management positions at medium and large sized American daily newspapers during the time period in question. Twelve of the fourteen respondents managed teams or divisions responsible for their publications’ online presence. Two of the
respondents, while not directly managing staff working on content for online, held senior editorial positions and were heavily involved in the planning for and implementation of their publications’ first online presence.

This study seeks to analyze the processes newspaper managers used when managing the Internet as an emerging and potentially disruptive technology and as a new medium for content delivery. How close to the plans laid out by innovation management theory were the processes, and what role did attitudes toward the medium and the culture within the industry affect the types of processes used and the effectiveness of the tactics? Qualitative interviews were conducted to determine the degree to which managers were employing the “systematic technology-evaluation and adoption processes recommended by management experts,” during the time period of 1992-2005, (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002) and to get a sense of how managers perceived new media before and during the process. It is conventional wisdom that “many people in the newspaper business...missed the significance of the internet” (Shirky, 2008), or as it is often bluntly stated “the Internet killed newspapers.” To what degree is this claim true, and what role, if any, did the management processes used to approach the new medium play in this scenario?

The challenge presented by the Internet was more than just one of potential profit or revenue disruption. The explosion of digital media and the ease of production it brought about was a challenge to the very “professional self-definition” of journalism that the field is based on (Shirky, 2008). Professionalism is not a negative attribute by any means, but as Shirky states:

Sometimes, though, the professional outlook can become a disadvantage, preventing the very people who have the most as stake – the professionals themselves – from understanding major changes to the structure of their profession. (Shirky, 2008)
Given this existential challenge presented to journalism by the new media, knowledge is needed on how this dilemma affects the types of processes used to implement and manage new technologies in media companies. Does this circumstance limit the effectiveness of the practices recommended by general management theory?
As communication technologies advance at an increasingly rapid pace, the number of content providers and the ease of publishing content have also increased. At the same time, the cost of communicating information has fallen drastically. This dynamic creates a threat to the very commercial viability of media companies (Shirky, 2008), and makes the industry one of the most susceptible to the challenges faced by the emergence of a potentially disruptive technology. Despite the fact that “few organizations in the 21st century will completely escape the impact of innovation,” (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002) research on innovation management has focused more on smaller organizations and individual projects. However, for the most part, organizations adopt new ideas before individuals can adopt them (Rogers, 2003). And even with the rapid pace of change to the way media content is produced and distributed in recent years, there has been a dearth of focus within the media management and mass communication literature on managing innovation and planning for potentially disruptive technology (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002). This research is needed because organizations often “have to decide if and when they will use an emerging technology before its effect on the industry is evident” (Wood Adams, 2008; Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000).

The research that does exist on innovation management in organizations has identified certain processes that can lend some order to evaluating and implementing innovations, somewhat mitigating the “potentially disruptive” element of the new technology (Rogers, 2003). This sequence of “decisions, actions and events” (Wood Adams, 2008) won’t always “reduce the risks and challenges involved, but it may make is easier to manage them” (Day, Shoemaker & Gunther, 2000).
Managing Emerging Technologies: A Different Game With Different Rules

In 1994, the Wharton School of Business conducted a comparative study aimed at gaining an understanding of innovation management strategies used across multiple industries. The research identified common issues that managers must address when dealing with potentially disruptive technologies. They were:

1) Evaluating the technology; 2) deciding whether, when, and how aggressively to commit to it; 3) deciding how to develop a new technology-based product for an entirely new market; and 4) deciding how to design the organization to accomplish these tasks in such a way as to ensure that the organization would stay competitive in the new environment created by the technology. (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000)

These issues are particularly challenging for incumbent firms who have established positions in the marketplace, and operate under tried-and-true management strategies (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000). Despite the fact that these firms are the most well equipped with resources to successfully leverage emerging technologies, “their finely honed instincts, slowly acquired heuristics and embedded skills make it tough” for them to effectively deal with new technologies that present a “new game” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000). The various commitments these firms have (to facilities, partners, customers, etc.) limit their flexibility. The result can be a lumbering entity that is unable to make use of its deep pockets, because, at least initially, it is impossible to tell if the emerging technology will be able to contribute to making those pockets deeper. These incumbents, despite their capabilities, “are rarely in the forefront of commercializing new technologies that don’t initially meet the needs of mainstream customers and appeal only to small or emerging markets” (Bower & Christensen, 1995). Day and Shoemaker identify this uncertainty about consumer usage patterns and subsequently market potential as one
of the “most confusing aspects of emerging technologies” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000).

The Internet as a Potentially Disruptive Technology for Newspaper Companies

The challenge of planning for and implementing innovation presents a complex set of issues and problems that managers are not accustomed to dealing with. At the same time, for companies to survive and flourish in the era of rapidly developing technology, it is imperative that they be able to effectively leverage and integrate these innovations. Nowhere is this truer than the media industry. In fact, in their seminal work “Managing Emerging Technologies,” Day and Shoemaker identified the media industry as “one of those most affected by technological innovation in the 1990s” (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002). The basic reason that advances in multimedia and interactive technologies affect media companies so greatly is that these innovations “increase the number of content producers and the availability of content” (Picard, 2003). Previously, one needed to possess expensive printing technology to have the capabilities to widely distribute the written word. The barrier of entry to publication online is basically a modem, a computer, and an understanding of how to upload content. This situation presented newspapers with more competition and a challenge to their established position as content and information providers. This ultimately can affect revenue streams, because “advertisers are responding to the new opportunities to reach potential customers” (Picard, 2003). However, little research exists within mass communication literature on the management of innovation (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002), and most newspaper companies still do not have a firm grasp on what exactly to do with their Web sites or how to effectively monetize them (Wood Adams, 2008). The question must be asked: why is this the case? Why have these
companies with ample resources and household names not been at the forefront of the “cyberspace race”? (Wood Adams, 2008).

Part of the explanation for the lackluster approach by newspaper companies to the new media is the culture that exists within the industry with regards to innovation. Nguyen dubs this attitude the “long-established fear-driven innovation culture among newspeople” (Nguyen, 2008). It is easy to see how this culture that is highly resistant to change developed. With well-entrenched positions in the marketplace, media companies prefer growth by way of “incremental, predictable changes” (Nguyen, 2008) that result in maintaining stability. Their business models are built on consistency (Picard, 2003).

Newspaper publishing became one of the most profitable business ventures in the world in the twentieth century, as the returns it netted far outperformed other industries. They became “cash cows – firms that produce regular, high returns, (that) are included in the portfolios of most investment funds” (Picard, 2003). Since these companies are generating such high profit margins using established technology (print), they tend to have a negative attitude towards radical changes “perceived to be able to generate better alternatives to existing products” (Nguyen, 2008). So, the industry has never had an impetus (at least not one directly tied to the latest earnings report) to innovate, and the idea of innovation was one generally regarded with fear rather than excitement or even curiosity. This affects the management process at the agenda-setting stage, because when attempting to define the problem, judgment will be clouded. Rather than asking, “How can we best use this medium to distribute our content?” the question may become “How can we use this medium and ensure we are protecting our established print product?” When the emerging technology is
immediately treated as foe rather than friend, the process of examining and possibly embracing it becomes more subject to pitfalls (Nguyen, 2008).

So, with stable business models based on stable technologies, newspaper companies found little reason to innovate, and a culture was born that left these companies struggling to figure out how to respond to emerging communication and information technologies (Picard, 2003). This has become increasingly apparent over the past decades, as “unprecedented technological advancements” (Nguyen, 2008) caused the fear-driven culture to become intensified. Essentially, the worry with regard to new technologies is that they will be able to provide a level of substitutability to the functions of established technologies. So, once that substitutability is perceived as a legitimate threat, media managers “hastily take actions to experiment with the new to avoid being displaced or even replaced in the future” (Nguyen, 2008). Nguyen refers to this approach as “being faithful by being faithless,” a track that will make it impossible for the innovation to mature into a viable product with a healthy market (Nguyen, 2008). Once managers do decide to embrace new media, the rushed, forced nature in which they do it usually results in an effort that is not serious. In addition, this late entry into the game leaves media companies with “inadequate time to be technically, professionally, and commercially prepared” (Nguyen, 2008), a failure at the “implementation stage” (Rogers, 2003) of the process.

The emergence of the Internet made very apparent this defensive, anti-innovation culture within the news industry. But it seems unfair to simply characterize people in the media industry as technology Scrooges, resistant to any and all change regardless of the upside the change may present. It is true that the profit margins media companies were enjoying limited their motivation to experiment with innovation (Nguyen, 2008), but the
challenge posed by the new medium was more than just a challenge to the bottom line. It was a challenge to the profession itself (Shirky, 2008). The Internet was changing the way production, reproduction, and distribution of content occurred, and changing it in ways that took it out of the hands of media professionals in some cases. Media companies had grown accustomed to only taking seriously threats from other professional media outlets (Shirky, 2008), and the threat presented by these technological innovations was entirely new type of challenge. As Shirky surmises, “It is easier to understand that you face competition than obsolescence” (Shirky, 2008).

Confounding the problems presented by the culture was the fact that when the new medium began to penetrate daily life, newspaper readership had been on a steady decline for some 30 years (Nguyen, 2008). Cable and satellite television had already started to chip away at a market that newspapers once had cornered, and with the development of the Internet, proponents of the new technologies continued to project the “imminent demise of print media” (Picard, 2003). So, newspaper companies jumped in, attempting to catch up to a market that was passing them by. They embraced an approach now known as “shovelware” – essentially just reformatting the content of the daily paper for the online edition (Nguyen, 2008). Referring back to Rogers’ stages of managing innovation, this tactic runs afoul of the recommendations in the matching stage, because the newspaper is not using the new medium in a way that will tap a new market and bring in new consumers. It is simply using a new technology as a solution to an old problem: giving people a place to read the newspaper. A thorough examination of the attributes offered by the medium would have led managers to ask serious questions about how online editions to achieve several important goals, such as “building new readers and revenues, protecting the
advertising base, and reducing the costs of production and distribution” (Bressers, 2006). Part of that missing out on building new readers and revenues was the failure to realize the most important characteristic the new medium possessed - “the two-way relationship between users and between users and journalists” (Bressers, 2006). This is also a cultural, attitudinal issue, because the news industry traditionally operated from a “we publish, you read” mindset (Bressers, 2006). But in an “era of multidirectional, digital communication, the audience can be an integral part of the process – and it’s becoming clear that they must be” (Gillmor, 2004). Without considering this aspect of the digital medium, managers cannot properly identify the strategic significance of the technology, and they will have an even harder time getting resources diverted to the teams working on the innovation, and possibly an even tougher time convincing their employees to fully embrace their new roles.

There is no question that the proliferation of information technologies, primarily the Internet, is challenging for newspaper companies who are used to a monopoly of sorts on information dissemination. But challenge does not have to translate to threat. Without question, the game has changed and will never be the same. Publishers need to get used to the fact that advertising revenues will be spread across an increasing number of content outlets (Picard, 2003). By using the tactics and strategies put forth by innovation management literature, media managers can be ahead of the curve on which technologies are viable for the dissemination of their content and which should be left along. This study will seek to discover to what degree newspaper managers used suggested processes, to what degree their perception of the new medium affected the tactics they used, and what processes and tactics were most effective in implementing online editions in American newsrooms.
Pitfalls of Managing Innovation

There are several circumstances that make the management of immature technologies challenging for large established firms in mature industries. Under the established, analytical processes most companies use to evaluate the allocation of investments, it is very difficult to commit to “markets and customers that seem insignificant or do not yet exist” (Bower & Christensen, 1995), at the expense of “diverting resources from known customer needs in established markets.” This dynamic is particularly problematic for newspaper managers for several reasons. If they decided to redirect resources to an online operation, they would have fewer resources for their print product. There is still to this day confusion over how to most effectively monetize online readership, and although revenues from print products may be falling, there is still a tried and true process of how to profit from them. Secondly, the ease of publishing online for non-media professionals put professional journalists in this era in an awkward position because it threatened the way they perceived their work. Managers dealing in journalism – “the information people need to manage their lives” (Gilmor, 2004) – had tough decisions to make about approaching the medium not only because it threatened the success of their established products, but because it only seemed to threaten their worth (Shirky, 2008).

Because of this demanding, profit-driven attitude, the entrenched strategies for management of existing technologies, and the need to protect professional self-definition, organizations often fall prey to several pitfalls. The decision making process for managing emerging technologies can be boiled down to three questions: when to commit to the technology, how to commit to the technology, and to what degree to commit to the
technology. Although they all act in concert, for analytical purposes, it is appropriate to consider these questions individually.

Managers tend to operate using mental models that produce consistent results, “reducing uncertainty to manageable levels” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000). This makes sense, as their primary function is to produce consistent results with the tools given to them. Their success or failure in guessing right with those tools to produce results is how they are evaluated. So, “risk is reduced – and careers are safeguarded – by giving known customers what they want” (Bower & Christensen, 1995).

However, emerging technologies produce “unfamiliar situations” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000) that do not fit these time-tested models, and these models can at times act as blinders. Managers may miss the potential value a technology could offer a consumer, so they dismiss the technology, and lose valuable time. The decision-making models many managers use allow them only to see the qualities valued by existing customers (Bower & Christensen, 1995). This is particularly and increasingly limiting with respect to the exponential rate at which communication technology is improving. Day and Shoemaker point at that “early iterations of most emerging technologies often make them easy to dismiss” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000).

The result is that when the company eventually does experiment with the technology, it is motivated by the “fear of becoming irrelevant rather than excitement” (Nguyen, 2008). Managers begin to perceive the technology as a potential threat, and threats fit into their mental models. They act hastily to embrace the innovation, often still not thinking of the “ultimate potential of the technology” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000). The resulting management practices limit that potential instead of fostering it.
(Nguyen, 2008). Developing processes for managing new technologies takes time, as does the development of the technology itself. And as the innovation continues to develop, so does the market for the potential innovation. (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000) So the earlier managers begin to seriously evaluate the technology, the more prepared they are to keep with the evolution of the opportunities it offers. This assessment may still result in the incumbent not embracing the technology, “but then it will be for the right reasons, rather than the result of a failure of imagination or a desire to protect the status quo” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000)

But, constrained by a “traditional value network” (Nguyen, 2008), managers often avoid the gamble of early participation, and when they do decide to jump in, they often do so with an approach that, while effective for managing established technologies, is woefully ineffective in dealing with emerging technologies. The processes that practitioners rely on exist to mitigate risk. Innovations present a much higher degree of risk than established technologies do, but the risks are of a different nature.

What makes participation in emerging technologies a gamble is the premium that traditional value network places on maximizing financial and personnel resources. Compounding that risk is that not only are the returns for committing to an innovation uncertain, embracing them also means diverting resources away from more proven, established technologies. So, after delaying participation in embracing the technology, the managers then often fail to allocate adequate resources to the innovation (Bower & Christensen, 1995). Managers have legitimate concerns about the possibility of “cannibalizing existing profitable products” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000), but they must weigh those concerns against the need to uncover and cash in on immature and
developing markets. With regard to newspaper managers, the issue of diverting resources is not just a question of human resources and capital, but also one of content. Distributing their commodity – information – through a new channel without a proven method of profiting from it seems counterintuitive. They must take into consideration “the market relation between their inline offerings and their core products” (i.e., the print newspaper) (Bower & Christensen, 1995). However, research has shown that in many cases, a substantial amount of readers of print editions also read the publications’ online edition, and that a significant number of readers still prefer the print edition. This is not to say that this will always be the case, or to say that the online product is not extremely valuable, but that “serving as an extension of their print counterparts could be a practical strategy for online newspapers” (Bressers, 2006). If nothing else, this research indicates that market assessment is important in planning for new products, because concerns over an online edition being a “money pit” or established readers not being interested in an online product are often somewhat unfounded.

Those concerns are often weighed unevenly because the conventional wisdom that managers typically use is incapable of diverting resources to innovations “that current customers explicitly don’t want and whose profit margins seem unattractive” (Bower & Christensen, 1995). As a result, those products whose profit margins are proven receive the bulk of funding and attention, and “the ability of the emerging technology to better meet the needs of noncustomers is overlooked” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000). Managers often operate in an environment of limited resources and tightly restricted investments decisions. Their processes for allocating resources usually dictate that proposals to “add capacity of to develop new products or processes” are formed at “lower levels of
organizations in engineering groups or project teams” (Bower & Christensen, 1995). These departments do not usually have the sway to get managers to take them seriously unless they can prove that the technology will produce profit with a high degree of certainty.

The final pitfall managers often face when attempting to manage an emerging technology is the urge to veer off course too quickly when it appears their efforts are not producing the desired results (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000). Again, this is a result of using metrics that are suitable for the established to evaluate the immature. Often managers will become impatient, withdraw from participation, and then see the market develop from the sidelines. At that stage, it is too late to establish a strong leadership position (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000).

So the key pitfalls managers face when deciding how to approach emerging technologies are delayed participation, relying on management processes that are incapable of synthesizing all the complexities of innovation, reluctance to divert appropriate and necessary resources to the unproven technologies, and not giving the innovation (and its market) enough time to mature before deciding to give up on it. It is clear a radically different set of principles and tactics must be used to effectively play this “different game with different rules” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000). While completely avoiding these pitfalls is not possible, management research has identified patterns and practices that, if committed to, can make the pitfalls easier to manage.

Effectively Managing Emerging Technologies: Processes and Practices

Given the differences between managing emerging and established technologies, the costly pitfalls practitioners face when applying their tried and true processes to managing potentially disruptive innovation, and the high-stakes game many managers are playing by
having limited resources and being evaluated based on their ability to limit risk, it is clear a need exists for the “development of innovation management theory” (Wood Adams, 2008). However, “within the media management and mass communication literatures” (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002) there has been little attention paid to this area, even with the “rapid changes that have overtaken media production and distribution in recent years,” (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002) and the first experiments with how to produce and staff an online edition were shaky at best (Bressers, 2006).

Despite this lack of extant research on this subject in the media management literature, studies of innovation management in general have identified certain steps and processes that “appear related to improved likelihood of success” (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002) when managers decide to engage a new technology. In the seminal work *Diffusion of Innovations*, Rogers lays out a model for how organizations can best “adopt a technology and then manage its implementation and use,” (Rogers, 2003) limiting the disruptive nature of the innovation.

Rogers’ model divides the innovation process into two sub-processes – initiation and implementation. Initiation consists of “all of the information gathering, conceptualization, and planning for the adoption” (Wood Adams, 2008), and implementation, which consists of “all of the events, actions, and decisions involved in putting the innovations to use” (Wood Adams, 2008). There are five stages in the process – two fall under initiation, and three under implementation.

The first stage is “agenda-setting” (Rogers, 2003). Here, the organization defines the problem that may create the need for innovation, and searches the organization for resources that will be useful in addressing the problem (Rogers, 2003). For example, for
newspaper companies, the problem they are looking to solve is how to efficiently and effectively disseminate the content they produce and do so in a manner that will allow the content to produce enough revenue to keep them in business and profit. For many years, printed-paper has been the solution to that problem, a solution their customers (readers and advertisers) found satisfactory. Print production is a mature technology, but new technologies present different challenges in assessment. Part of defining the problem is determining whether or not the technology is truly disruptive or not, because this will dictate how the company proceeds. By conducting a “pre-adoption technology assessment-and-forecasting investigation” (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002), this can be accomplished. One way to gain insight as to the potentially disruptive nature of the technology is to “examine internal disagreements over the developments of new products or technologies” (Bower & Christensen, 1995). If financial and marketing managers are arguing against engaging the technology, but technical personnel support the innovation and are convinced a new market will eventually emerge, that is a disagreement that “often signals a disruptive technology that top-level managers should explore” (Bower & Christensen, 1995). At the least, marketing and technical teams should have equal influence at this stage of the process (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002).

Once managers determine whether or not a technology should be approached as disruptive or sustaining, they must then figure out the “strategic significance” (Bower & Christensen, 1995) of the technology. Here it is again important for managers to remember that they cannot assess and project the progress of an emerging technology against that of an established one. For newspaper companies, the print product had been so profitable for so long, that any other methods of content distribution wouldn't stand a chance of gaining
support if weighed against it. It is not important that the new technology surpasses the capabilities of the old. What is significant is “the trajectory of the disruptive technology compared with that of the market” (Bower & Christensen, 1995). If technical staff with good track records predict that the innovation “might progress faster than the market’s demand for performance improvement,” (Bower & Christensen, 1995) that technology will likely have strategic significance. Once it has been determined that a technology is both disruptive and strategically critical, (Bower & Christensen, 1995) managers must conduct a “market-assessment-and-forecasting-investigation” (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002). This is a process managers are very familiar with when dealing with established technologies, as it is an important part of the previously discussed “traditional value network” (Nguyen, 2008). However, market research for an emerging technology is a different animal, because at the point when the data is needed, “no concrete market exists” (Bower, & Christensen, 1995). The answer to this conundrum is simple but requires work managers are not accustomed to: create information about the markets. Information such as “who the customers will be, which dimensions of product performance will matter most to which customers, what the right price points will be, etc.” (Bower & Christensen, 1995).

Armed with all of this (albeit tenuous) knowledge, managers move to the second stage of initiation, “matching” (Rogers, 2003). Here, “conceptual matching of the problem with the innovation occurs in order to establish how well they fit.” How feasible is the innovation in solving the organizations’ problem? What are the benefits and problems the company will encounter once the innovation is implemented (Rogers, 2003)? In the case of newspaper companies, at the stage, the focus would be on the conceptualization of the online product itself. Will the same stories from the print product appear word for word on
the website? What about the photos? Will they be published before or after the paper hits newsstands? Will readers be allowed to comment on the stories? Given that, for most people in the media industry at this time, this was the first foray into the production of content online, these and several other questions needed to be addressed and worked through in order to understand how exactly a newspaper company could make use of a website. Emerging technologies are difficult enough to sell to shareholders as is with their unproven potential for profit. If they are not matched properly with a problem or a need, it will be impossible to give them the amount of time and resources they need to develop.

After defining the problem that creates the need for innovation, and determining whether or not a specific innovation works toward solving that problem, the process moves to “implementation, all of the events, actions, and decisions involved in putting an innovation into use.” Here, the organization makes the innovation its own, and both organization and innovation are expected to change in the process (Rogers, 2003). Rogers calls the first stage in the process “redefining/restructuring.” The way a company organizes itself to effectively implement an innovation is different than the way it organizes to manage established technologies. This stage is particularly challenging in media companies, because many professionals in that industry operate with a high degree of routine in their work. This is helpful and at times essential for organizing the fast-paced and unpredictable nature of working in journalism, but it also can make it difficult to implement change. Managers must at this stage decide who will be working on the online product, and whether or not those individuals will be focused solely on the website or splitting time between their print duties.
It is more challenging, and requires a great deal of creativity and managing uncertainty and even pushback from employees, but management literature has identified certain tactics that can be used to make sure the organization sets itself up to make the most of the innovation. It is of critical importance that this occurs early in the life of the innovation. If it doesn’t, improper organization will become “rapidly routinized and embedded in the organization’s structure” (Rogers, 2003).

One tactic for organizing is putting together cross-departmental, multi-functional teams to take full advantage of the knowledge within the organization (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002). With a range of individuals that have a multitude of talents working on the innovation, the teams will be better equipped to “pursue multiple paths and test a variety of attribute mixes” (Dougherty & Corse, 1995), important parts of managing innovation that are very difficult to achieve through the use of conventional, bureaucratic management practices. Issues and conflicts are certain to arise when putting individuals from different functional silos together, particularly because the concept of innovation management “bridges the business and technical worlds” (Wood Adams, 2008), but these conflicts will best be resolved in small teams.

Management literature posits that these teams, and only these teams, should be responsible for working on the emerging technology. In order to fully explore the potential of the emerging technology, this organization of teams should be kept separate from the rest of the company, otherwise, “debilitating arguments arise” over “what resources which groups get and whether or when to cannibalize established products” (Bower & Christensen, 1995). It stands to reason that those with less knowledge of the innovation’s potential will be more skeptical of diverting resources away from established products, and
this organizational model can quell some of that inherent discord. In a newsroom, this would mean assigning a few people to the task of uploading and managing the content for the paper’s website. They would be responsible for rewriting headlines, deciding when to use added-value content such as documents and video, and keeping the site up to date. The manager of this team would act as the liaison with those responsible for the print product, but, according to the innovation management theory, the interaction between the print and online side should be limited. Management theory hypothesizes that if reporters and editors responsible for the print product are suddenly tasked with handling content for the innovation (the online product), they will most likely not put forth the same effort and commitment they do in their work with the established technology (print) (Rogers, 2003). From a theoretical standpoint, managers should keep in mind that “the innovative organization needs to be defined in its own terms, not in terms of its deviation from the 20th century model” (Dougherty, 2004). The metrics for the online edition will be different from those for the print product, and having separate teams handling production duties will reduce the chance that the new technology receives a half-hearted effort because of its relative market immaturity (Bower & Christensen, 1995). Employees will certainly compare and contrast the way teams working on innovation are managed to the way those dealing with established technologies are handled, but it is management’s responsibility to stay focused on the differences and pitfalls that emerging technologies present.

Once innovation-focused teams are organized, managers must define their work and motivate them to engage in it and be committed to the innovation’s success. Managers are asking their employees to accomplish “the very complicated, confusing, and ambiguous work of sustained innovation” (Dougherty, 2004), and to do so in a work environment
(cross-functional teams) that they are not familiar with. So, it is of utmost importance at this stage to define, or as Rogers says “clarify” (Rogers, 2003) people’s roles and responsibilities. As jobs are defined, the purpose and value of the innovation will slowly become more evident to the members of the organizations. (Rogers, 2003) The jobs of individuals assigned to the teams will be different from the tasks they did before because they will now be collaborating with people who perform various other functions. For example, a reporter who is re-assigned as a web producer may not be used to working with IT people, but this will now be an integral part of his or her work. Organizing for innovation is more “problem solving” oriented than organizing to manage established technologies, and “organizing by function further inhibits problem setting, which precludes creative problem solving” (Dougherty, 2004).

After managers organize cross-functional teams to work on innovation and then give the members of those teams defined roles and responsibilities, they must have in place a mechanism by which to evaluate the work of the teams. The monitoring process used must be different than the one used for evaluating teams working with established technologies. This is not to imply that evaluating the progress of innovation development should be less rigorous, because embracing innovation “makes it easy to squander huge amounts of resources” (Dougherty, 2004). So, the process needs to be monitored, but not by solely on an objective-achievement basis, particularly in the short-term (Dougherty, 2004). This, again, is a good place to use market research. The online edition may not be generating ad revenue in a way that is commensurate to the resources being diverted to it, but focus groups could be conducted to gauge whether or not users feel that the site has grown, and whether or not is improving. Page views and other quantitative indicators are
important, but they should be used in concert with qualitative analysis of the attitudes toward the innovation. The importance of near constant market analysis cannot be stressed enough in the process of introducing and managing an emerging technology.
RESEARCH QUESTION

It is clear that the processed involved in managing an emerging technology are far different from those used to manage established technologies. These differences create several pitfalls that can derail the innovation process and limit the eventual impact the innovation can have for a company. As a new way of disseminating content, the Internet had and has the potential to be an extremely disruptive technology for newspaper companies who had seen huge profit margins for many years with their established technology, print. The new medium was not only a threat to their bottom line, but also a threat to their very professional identity, given the new relative ease of producing and disseminating online it afforded the general public. Given all this, the study seeks to examine the processes used by daily newspapers in the 1990s and early 2000s to plan for and implement their first online editions. How were the processes similar, and dissimilar, from those espoused by general innovation management literature? And given the existential threat this new form of content distribution posed to a well-established industry, how did attitudes and perceptions of the new medium impact the processes used and the effectiveness of those methods?

The research questions asked by this study are: how closely did the processes used by newspaper managers adhere to the processes suggested by innovation management theory? Were the processes generally haphazard, or were they engaged in with full commitment? What were the important factors in determining the level of commitment to new media?
METHOD

In order to engage in a comparative analysis of the processes that newspapers used to develop online editions, and to examine attitudes toward the digital medium and how those attitudes affected the processes used, 14 individuals who worked in management positions in the time period of focus (1992-2005) were interviewed in-depth using open-ended questions. A snowball search method was used to locate the interview subjects. People who worked in the newspaper industry at the time provided contact information of former colleagues. The research began with two names, and grew from there by requesting similar data from the subjects at the conclusion of the interviews. Per the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board, a recruitment document and consent form were emailed to the subjects, and an appointment for telephone contact was arranged from there.

The subject group was comprised of nine men and five women. Twelve of the 14 were at some point during the time period of focus responsible for managing a team that handled their publications' online product. The remaining two held senior level editorial positions during the time period in question. All worked at medium-sized to large newspapers (circulations between 30,000 and 700,000) and were heavily involved in the planning for and implementation of online content. They worked at publications including the San Jose Mercury News, the Charlotte Observer, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Albuquerque Tribune, the Houston Chronicle, the Missoulian (Missoula, Montana), the Washington Post, the Arizona Republic, the Minneapolis Star Tribune, and the Atlanta Journal Constitution.

Intensive interviews were chosen as the method of data collection because of the
wealth of detail the method provides (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). The interviews were conducted between March 28, 2011, and July 15, 2011. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes, and the data was recorded and transcribed to maintain the richness and depth that qualitative research facilitates. Some interviews lasted longer than others because certain subjects were more talkative than others.

The research sought to ascertain not only if and when certain publications went online and how they organized and staffed the project, but also to gauge opinions toward the new medium at the time in question. The literature review confirms and describes the ways that perceptions and attitudes towards a new technology can drastically change the way it is approached and ultimately implemented by managers (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000; Nguyen, 2008; Bower & Christensen, 1995; Picard, 2003; Wood Adams, 2008). Communication literature also posits that generally, a culture that was oppositional and even confrontational about the idea of innovation existed in newsrooms at this time (Nguyen, 2008; Picard, 2003), so the subjects were asked to describe how they perceived managers’ attitudes toward publishing content online at their specific papers. The general methods suggested by innovation management theory (Rogers, 2003; Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000) were adopted into specific, situational questions to determine whether or not the subjects adhered to the theoretical framework, and how far they deviated from it. The line of questioning was aimed at understanding the types of processes that were used, but also whether or not the subjects felt they were effective and why. As to the point of why they weren’t successful, referred to in the literature review as “pitfalls,” the subjects were asked to elaborate on why they felt those pitfalls arose. Subjects were asked how large an issue demand for profit was at the time their publications first went online, and whether or
not the importance of that issue changed over time. They were also asked to comment on whether or not they felt their paper was truly committed to the new technology, or engaging it in a “half-hearted way” (Bressers, 2006), which Day and Shoemaker identify as a critical pitfall “that impedes emerging technologies” (Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000). Management and communication literature also identify technical aspects such as change in workflow and uncertainty over what one’s job actually is when it comes to implementing innovation (Rogers, 2003), so subjects were asked to comment on this topic as well (provided they didn’t bring it up themselves, which several did). The interview transcripts can be found in the appendix section (see Appendix A, p. 60).

In order to identify if there were certain characteristics of newsrooms or managers that made them more or less likely to embrace the idea of an online edition, how professionalism and industry culture impacted new media’s development, and to examine the processes used and why they did or didn’t work, the interview transcripts were analyzed for key trends and themes which appeared throughout the data. That data was then compared and contrasted with the themes present in management and communication literature.
RESULTS

The findings of the research provide a descriptive analysis of the attitudes towards and perceptions of new media by managers at newspapers during the time period of 1992-2005. The responses are broken down into categories that mirror the stages and potential pitfalls in the innovation process outlined in the management literature (Rogers, 2003; Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000).

The Agenda-Setting Stage – Recognizing the Implications of the Internet

The first in the innovation process is evaluating the new technology and assessing how its development and adoption will impact a given industry. In the case of newspapers, the data point to several factors that made some publications more likely to understand the potential impact of new media, and in turn experiment more successfully. As shown in the literature review, the manner in which a technology is assessed (e.g., whether or not it is viewed as potentially disruptive and/or potentially valuable) directly affects the way it is allowed to evolve.

The first and perhaps most basic of these is the geographic location of the paper. Several of the subjects stated that they felt that where the publication was located had a significant impact on the way innovation was approached. One of the first American newspapers to go online was the SJMN, launching an AOL-based portal called Mercury Center. Five of the respondents spent time in the early ‘90s at the SJMN, and all chalked the paper’s aggressive approach to new media up to, in large part, its location in Northern California near Silicon Valley, the center of computer innovation from the 1980s on. Bob Ryan, who was involved in the development of Mercury Center, explained:
San Jose is in the heart of what’s called Silicon Valley. A lot of the high-tech innovation and business development that has occurred in the last 25 to 30 years had its inception here in this part of California, just south of San Francisco. The leadership in various positions was in close contact with a lot of people who were in the high tech industry. And when online networks began to emerge, initially...it became clear that electronic services were going to transform, in ways nobody really could predict with any certainty, but that they were going to transform the media industry. (B. Ryan, interview, May 4, 2011)

Pam Moreland, who became the leader of Mercury Center in 2000, described a particular episode when she could feel the winds of change blowing on the West Coast while she was working at a small paper in Marin, California, a small paper 80 miles north of San Jose:

I remember one reporter, she had just come from Columbia (University), and she decided to come to the Bay Area to look for a job, because there were many newspapers in the region with a circulation level of, say, 40,000 or above. She thought that was a sophistication level that was good for her and all that. She was covering night cops, some city council meeting. And she quit, and told me she was going to a dot com in San Francisco called chickflick.com. And she was going to be making as much as I was as the managing editor of this paper. So, there was something going on, and you could see it going on. I think that’s the main reason the SJMC was ahead of the curve. (P. Moreland, personal communication, March 28, 2011)

Alumni of the SJMC were not the only respondents who cited geography as a key factor in their paper embracing new media, though. Dick Van Helsema was managing the publishing system for the Charlotte Observer, which was about as far from the tech boom that was occurring in Silicon Valley as one could get in the U.S., but his paper was still one of the first to experiment with online content. He ascribes this fact to the business community in the area the paper covered as well:

Charlotte is the second largest banking city in North America...incredible amount of insurance and commerce, very progressive business town. It also has no other competitors nearby. (D. Van Helsema, interview, May 17, 2011)

When the paper’s parent company, Knight Ridder, launched an entity called Knight
Ridder Digital to put all of its digital products under one umbrella, Van Helsema was tasked with conducting an analysis of the characteristics that made a market ripe for a paper to succeed online. He concluded that the unique characteristics were:

...A medium to large size market, so it had critical mass, or wasn’t so large that it actually became saturated with competitors...there were lots of people getting into this at the same time...Some TV stations, like in Raleigh, N.C, actually were doing a better job on the web the newspaper and magazines in the local area...it’s like if you have plants competing in your garden, things aren't going to grow as fast. (D. Van Helsema, interview, May 17, 2011)

On the other hand, when an organization does not have the good fortune to be positioned geographically in a manner that allows it to interact with more innovative business environments, and it is surrounded by several natural competitors in its media landscape, that organization will likely struggle a great deal with implementing innovation. This is illustrated by the contrast one of the subjects saw when she moved from San Jose to work for the Washington Post. After writing a column called “Good Morning Silicon Valley” for five years, Pat Sullivan ended up on the East Coast in 2000 and found that:

D.C. was really different. Because, I was so absorbed in the Internet, and in the possibilities, and everybody on the West Coast knew all about it, and had signed on. And it was a real shock to come to D.C., and find they're still fighting battles from five years ago. (P. Sullivan, interview, April 27, 2011)

Another factor cited by several of the respondents was the presence of a particular individual (or individuals) in a leadership position that was forward-thinking and excited about the idea of innovating. When asked about their publications development of an online edition, seven of the subjects mentioned the importance of a certain person who breathed life into the process of innovation and created an environment that was conducive to experimenting with emerging technologies. The most cited figure is Bob Ingle, who was the executive editor of the SJMN when, under Ingle’s direction and command, the
paper launched Mercury Center. Ryan said that he believed Ingle’s presence was even more important than the proximity to the innovation hub of Silicon Valley:

I’d say the biggest reason (for the innovative culture at the SJMN), the other was the reason was the accident of vision, or genius, or whatever, but the editor at the time was a guy named Bob Ingle...he became extremely interested in the Internet. At that time it was emerging as a customer medium and he really, I think, was the driving force at the Mercury News and at Knight Ridder. (B. Ryan, interview, May 4, 2011)

The fact that Ingle was “extremely interested” in publishing online was driven by a realization of the capabilities the emerging technologies offered. Bruce Koon, who became managing editor of Mercury Center in 1994, said that Ingle:

...Saw the implication of, well, if you can do email, you can go onto a computer to get info like movies and things like that, why couldn’t you get the news? (B. Koon, interview, May 3, 2011)

This is essentially the definition of what occurs at the agenda-setting stage (Rogers, 2003): recognizing how an innovation can help a business solve a problem (in this case: distributing the content produced by the SJMN in a cost effective way across various platforms). However, efficient distribution of the print product’s content through an alternative medium was not the primary focus of those experimenting with publishing online. The subjects’ responses highlight several instances of individuals being acutely aware of what features could be offered online, and what it would be good for with regard to serving readers in new ways. One of the aspects most commonly cited by respondents was the simple fact that visuals and text had been connected in an electronic medium. Pat Sullivan, who wrote a successful early email blast (now column) entitled “Good Morning Silicon Valley” for the SJMN, believed she was witnessing a game changer:

...And I saw when visuals were finally connected with text, I thought, oh this is journalism, or this could be journalism. And I could see that there would be abilities that we didn’t have back then, to pull in all kinds of data, and connect people to sources that we would just write about in the past. Rather than just writing a report
about a government agency, we could actually show people what the report said. That got me very excited. (P. Sullivan, interview, April 27, 2011)

The second part of Sullivan’s response is indicative of another feature that was cited by several subjects as the cause for their attraction to new media: the amount of data it allowed journalists to share, and the ability to connect people with sources. Retha Hill, who in 1995 became the Metro editor for the Washington Post’s first online product, Digital Ink, tried to leverage the ability to offer more data in a number of ways. One such idea allowed Digital Ink to report on things taking place at City Hall before they happened, rather than the conventional way of waiting until after the meeting took place:

I hired these five or six editorial people, content developers, and their job was to go to the clerk’s for the council for the city of Washington and all the suburbs. They each had a beat. So they would go to the clerk’s office, take a floppy disk with them, every Tuesday or Wednesday download all the legislation that was going to be discussed at next week’s council meetings. The city council voted last night five to three on XYZ... We would get the full legislation, and we would tout the fact that in our local section, citizens could go and read full legislation of something that’s going to be discussed and voted on at a local council meeting. People loved that. No newspaper could do that before, and unless you were civic activists and you went downtown and got a copy of the agenda and all the legislation, it wasn't available. (R. Hill, interview, July 12, 2011)

In addition to experimenting with the types of data they offered through Digital Ink, Hill and her team also experimented with an aspect of the medium detailed in the literature review -- “the two-way relationship between users and between users and journalists” (Bressers, 2006). To achieve this end:

...We did the local arts and entertainment where you could look up restaurants, we did chats with our more popular columnists like the restaurant critic and automotive critic, or the guy who was the federal community columnist who wrote about the federal government from a workers standpoint, the people who worked for the federal government. These were hugely popular, that people could go online and ask these people questions. (R. Hill, interview, July 12, 2011)

Koon, who was in the managing editor in San Jose, attempted similar experiments as the
technology evolved. An entity that many sports fans take for granted these days was unheard of fifteen years ago:

I remember in 1995, Netscape continued to improve the browser, and I remember an engineer saying, hey look, you can do table now on the Web. I said, tables? And he said, yeah, you could do something like a basketball graphic, because it was right during March Madness. So we just did it, our first graphic impressions of a basketball (tournament) graphic. (B. Koon, interview, May 3, 2011)

Different publications experimented with various uses of the medium based on what they were attempting to offer their own unique customer bases. Howard Finberg, who was the senior editor for information technology at the *Arizona Star* in the mid ‘90s, knew what sort of information the Star’s readership would be interested in:

So what do you do in Arizona? You play golf. You can play golf in Arizona 12 months a year if you’re willing to put up with the heat...so golf was a good fit for us. And that was driven by market research, but it was also driven by looking around and seeing: what could we offer as an organization and a media company, where do we go pull our strengths, and offer something to the public that is not a repurposing of what we were already giving them in another form. (H. Finberg, interview, July 15, 2011)

Ten of the fourteen respondents remarked in some way that with their online operation, they set out to offer something different than what was offered by the print product. These individuals were not merely looking for fresh ways to inform and entertain readers, they were in some ways reshaping the function of the publication through the new capabilities offered by the medium. Newspapers have always been dedicated to serving and building communities, but the multi-directional flow of information offered online shaped the way some of the respondents thought their publication should serve readers online. Gina Setser, who headed up the first online team at the *Albuquerque Tribune*, believed right away that the idea behind publishing online needed to be different:

I kind of saw it as a way to further engage readers in the news product itself. And as a way to build a community around different topical areas, whether it was sports, and sports was always a made for the web tropical area...But I think I saw it more as
a community-building thing. And as a way to reach out to readers, and give them things we couldn't give them in the newspaper, more of an extension than a replacement. (G. Setser, interview, May 18, 2011)

Hill stated that being in Metro at a very large newspaper forced for to always be thinking about how the online arm could tactically separate itself:

So for Metro, as the local editor, the Washington Post had the highest penetration of any big city newspaper in the local area. So on any given day 80 percent of Washingtonians had already read the newspaper. So for me to just take local content and put it online, everyone had already read it. Homeless people had already read it that morning. So it was like that didn't make any sense. So I always had to come up with, what would bring people back to check out the local area of washingtonpost.com. (R. Hill, interview, July 12, 2011)

Some of the ideas that Hill experimented with were actually early iterations of services that are thought of to be part and parcel of the online world today. Take for example this attempt at securing instant feedback on an event that was still on going:

When the Pope came to Baltimore back in '95 or '96, he was at the Orioles stadium. And we had this method where we took index cards, and passed them down the aisles, and had people write little short snippets of what they were thinking about the Pope's visits. And they'd pass that back to editorial assistants, all these people that were working for me. And they'd call in on a cell phone, and I'd type them into this queue, and kept publishing every few minutes. So it was Twitter. Twitter before Twitter, we just made it. We knew we wanted to have these little short snippets. And we just made up things as it presented itself. And it was so freeing to just say, OK this has never been done before, how do we do this? (R. Hill, interview, July 12, 2011)

Identifying the medium's capability for being updated with reaction on an almost live basis is a perfect example for the type of thinking that takes place at the agenda-setting stage. The same can be said for the way that Hill and her colleagues handled the O.J. Simpson verdict, only this time they combined the ability to gauge instant reaction with a breaking news story. They set up a television set outside the Post's offices, and:

And we ran extension cords from our office down to this monitor. We hooked it up, so as soon as the verdict was read on CNN, we pressed the button, and you know 5 or 6 minutes later that's how slow this thing was, it said Not Guilty. And so people
walking by the Washington Post building, we had our students and our staff standing down there, we had people down there for a few hours saying, you can write up your opinion, type it in, type it in. If I type it in, where’s it gonna go? It’s gonna on the Washington Post’s online site. So people would come up, and they’d say, well I think it was terrible they found him not guilty, or I’m glad that they did it...We uploaded that, and people were like oh my god, you can do that? What is this thing? So we tried a little bit of everything. And the more you tried...you would get a response on some things; you wouldn’t get a response on some things. So it’s just a matter of experimenting. And we loved it. Because we knew that we could iterate quickly, sell cheaply, we didn’t have to go through a whole bunch of hoops getting permission from the newspaper. (R. Hill, interview, July 12, 2011)

The individuals who cited the most creative and innovative ideas where the ones whose organizations put real effort into thinking about what the new media could offer its customers. John Murrell, who was a part of the team that built and managed the Mercury Center in San Jose, mentioned the value of taking advantage of the searchability offered online:

We had file download areas, and posted hundreds of supplemental stories that couldn’t make it into the print paper. And one of the things to sort of connect the readership of the print paper to the resources that were available online was the use a number that would appear at the end of the story in the printed paper, and then if you went on to the Mercury Center, you could enter those as AOL keywords to get the full text of the story. (J. Murrell, interview, May 24, 2011)

None of these ideas had ever been tried before, so again, there is a certain degree of risk that trying various things online would fail and alienate some readers. This is why an environment that rewards trying new things even if they don’t always pan out is paramount. Steve Yelvington, who was the first online editor for the Star Tribune in Minneapolis, believed his publication’s culture was key:

So when we dove into this, it was with an intent of building a serious business, but it was with the expectation that we would make a whole lot of mistakes, and whatever we did was going to turn out to be wrong, but we knew that we had to fail forward, and in a learning way. So we expected to be able to get in, learn, probably undo what we had initially did, and then redo it. That was in the expectations at the very beginning. And that’s probably the most important asset we had, in the entire
process, was a willingness to learn from our own failures and adjust. (S. Yelvington, interview, July 1, 2011)

The responses also point to certain career-related characteristics that impacted one’s likelihood to be willing to embrace innovation. These passages begin to deal with the way industry culture, professional norms, and self-preservation affected the innovation management processes at newspapers. Chris Jennewein, who helped launch Mercury Center in San Jose, that there were certain types of people who took on those sorts of projects:

Online newspapers were largely developed by people who had visions, and in many cases were a little bit outside the traditional structure. You know if you were an editor on the way up in a print newsroom, you didn’t want to hurt your career by going off and doing something online. But if you were a visionary type who liked trying new things and was not afraid of maybe making mistake, had a lot of self-confidence, you might try online. (C. Jennewein, interview, June 17, 2011)

The flip side to an individual avoiding innovation, so as to minimize the chances of hurting their career, is less established employees beginning to see ventures like online publishing as their ticket to move up. Koon saw certain people combine career and innovation ambition:

It was less about age and more about just curiosity and maybe they were more technologically prone...I think it varied from newsroom to newsroom. I think in some newsrooms you had people who said, I want to move up in the newsroom and it’s gonna take me years to be the city editor because someone else is already there and they have someone else lined up...with all this online stuff happening maybe I can make my mark that way. (B. Koon, interview, May 3, 2011)

Other respondents also noticed ways that where an individual was at in their career affected their understanding of or outlook on innovation. Setser acknowledged that for the most part, younger journalists knew more about new media and where more excited, but that didn’t always translate to a better understanding of how new media would work for the paper and its audience:
They would be more knowledgeable, and you know, excited, but their view was sort of, yeah, well, what next? So they didn’t realize that a wall there was that they would have to bat their head against. And the young hired that we had were so busy trying to build their careers, and do truly great journalism because they all saw the paper as a stepping-stone, and I think it was more or less periphery for them. So really, it was kind of those mid career people who would step in and learn a little bit more about it. (G. Setser, interview, May 18, 2011)

The only demographic that received repeated praise for being open to innovation and cooperative in the process of getting content online were the people who dealt with the more technical side of the medium, and the reporters that covered them. Moreland, who managed the team in San Jose, remarked that:

...Especially in San Jose, the business section, and the reporters that covered technology were very open and very excited, and very cooperative...Designers were very excited, and very cooperative. The people that were the most recalcitrant were the traditional metro reporters and metro editors. The features people weren’t all that excited, so the more that you worked with designs, and had a feel for graphics, the more excited. Tech guys and designers were pretty pro. (P. Moreland, interview, March 28, 2011)

Along the same lines of how one’s perception of their own career impacted their approach to experimenting with emerging technologies, one subject gave a response that hints at part of the reason the newspaper industry may have had such a difficult time with innovation, regardless of age or status level. Dick Van Helsema from the Charlotte Observer believes the way the industry organizes itself professionally makes inherently unprepared to deal with change:

If you think of all the different silos of the newspaper management, you know, there’s the newsroom, and then there’s the advertising department, and then there’s production and circulation and technology, and typically those have been very vertical and exclusive silos, I think that the characteristics of people like me and others in the industry who have lived though the last 15 years of this... First of all, they did want to live one silo or another, it’s just restlessness, I think. And then they had, at least enough vision, to know, that, not staying in advertising or not staying in the newsroom...that was not going to be a problem. That was not going to be limiting. In other words a lot of people, “if I don’t stay in the newsroom and become executive editor by the time I’m 50, then I don’t really have a career, or if it I don’t
stay in the advertising and become a top moneymaking rainmaker, or a top sales person, or the ad exec leader or something, then I don’t have a career. I’ve never seen my career as being limited to those silos. I’ve always thought I want to pursue what I want to do best, and to me that was always whatever the next technology brought, and all the efficiencies opportunities and money you can make off that technology. (D. Van Helsema, interview, May 17, 2011)

Developing Online Operations: Matching and Restructuring

In addition to identifying several factors that created a situation where innovation was more likely to be engaged in a serious, focused manner, the subjects responses also provided insight on what the actual processes of getting content online was like and what issues and pitfalls were problematic.

In this area, the most dominant theme deals with resistance based on the online medium presenting a disruption in workflow routines. Bob Ryan, who had the benefit of working in an extremely innovative culture, summarized the conflict thusly:

But people can be…they can embrace a concept intellectually, and even emotionally, as long as it doesn’t require them changing the way they do things. (B. Ryan, interview, May 4, 2011)

Ryan went on to why the role and responsibilities were so entrenched within the industry:

I think it was really more a factor of personalities of the types of people who work at newspapers, that reflected the fact that it was a relatively old and mature business, and that people had refined the process of putting out a newspaper over many, many decades, and when so much energy is put into refining and making minute adjustments to the operations of a business, change becomes a very, very difficult thing to introduce, until it's absolutely essential. (B. Ryan, interview, May 4, 2011)

Over half of the respondents cited some sort of conflict over workflow or changes in routines within the organization. Ryan ascribed this to a shift a fundamental shift in the news cycle:

...It’s that transformation...the instant delivery of news that has completely transformed the way newspapers and newsrooms in particular, collections of reporters and editors, the way they operate. The knowledge that the deadline is constant, rather than there being a 24-hour news cycle, which was firmly baked in
the early 1990s, there was a measure and pace to the way reporters and editors would organize their days. And now, there’s still a fervent desire among folks who have been in the business more than 15 years to get back to the way it used to be when it was a more predictable pace. (B. Ryan, interview, May 4, 2011)

Koon shared story from his time at the Mercury News when Mercury Center was first launched, when despite the distinctly innovative culture, he had a clash over a lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities:

There was a big breaking news story going on, and some of the copy editors in the newsroom had been assigned to do the tagging so that it could immediately flow on to the AOL site. And I walked in and said, what’s going on, and they said, oh they’re about to announce the verdict, or whatever it was. And I said, wow, and the copy editor got up and left. And I said, where you going? He said, my shift is over. I laughed and said, yeah, well, we’re going to need to get this verdict up online to AOL. So I had to grab the manual book, and figure out how to load this verdict up online myself. So it was not uncommon in newsrooms at the time, that it wasn’t a question of being resistant, it’s that they weren’t even paying attention to it. (B. Koon, interview, May 3, 2011)

Two respondents, Gina Setser and Pat Sullivan, both stated that when their respective publications first went online, they taught themselves how to work and operate online, and built and maintained the newspaper’s website in their own off time. Both were working at medium-sized publications at that time. Sullivan was in Missoula, Montana, where she and a colleague named Dave Knadler developed a website for the Missoulian in 1993:

He was an editor, and I was a reporter, and so the two of us would sit down at night at his house or my house, and figure out how to do it, and then we’d design a page and figure it out, and then put it up, and then every night or every other night one of the other one of us would just put news stories up. We weren’t putting the whole paper up, because this was very much a hand coding operation. We both taught ourselves HTML, and HTML 1.0, I might point out. (P. Sullivan, interview, April 27, 2011)

Setser had a similar experience while working in Albuquerque:

...And later on after HTML came along, I sat around for a few weekend and taught myself HTML and then basically designed a website for the paper. And they let me play at it...in my “off time.” And then my real job the rest of the time. (G. Setser, interview, May 18, 2011)
In addition to grappling with how to assign the work of managing content online, another theme present in the responses was that several publications struggled with how exactly their online presence should look and feel, and what purpose it should serve. Tony Pederson, who was executive editor and senior VP for the *Houston Chronicle* when that publication first went online, described their dilemma:

...And we had a few interactive features, but the whole idea was basically to put the newspaper up online. And we didn't really know how it to make it look, *we didn’t know how to give it that newspaper feel*. And of course that idea of constant updates, when it first went up, nobody was thinking about that...And in those early days, you had some real Luddites, some real skeptics about the whole idea...if it didn’t appear in newsprint, it just didn’t have any validity to it. (T. Pederson, interview, March 25, 2011)

In San Jose, Chris Jennewein realized in the early stages of planning for Mercury Center that the product had a chance to be more visually appealing than a newspaper, and at the same time, quickly give readers the information they were looking for:

Mercury Center on AOL was probably the first online site that treated breaking news as the focus. Up until that point, most online sites treated the first page, the first view pages, as menus. Think about an academic journal, an old fashioned one, where the cover is just the title of the articles and the page numbers. Well, most online sites were that. So you had to go through menus to get to news, there was nothing that just popped up in the screen. And we came up with the idea of having a window on the very first page of Merc Center. And what appeared in there were headlines of breaking news. It was a very conscious decision and a remember a big argument about it...And I remember bringing in a copy of the ugliest academic journal I could find, and comparing it to that week’s Newsweek, and saying, see the difference. (C. Jennewein, interview, June 17, 2011)

Another topic mentioned in several of the responses dealt with the issue of “cannibalizing” the print product to provide content and resources for the online product. Some subjects, such as Bruce Koon, felt this debate a significant impact on the way things developed in San Jose:
It was a very real factor, and there’s no question that those concerns thwarted a lot of the early debates about how much we should do and how much resources we should devote to it...I don’t think it was until 2005 that senior newsroom management people at Knight Ridder newspapers across the country really embraced the idea and the understanding that trying to manage content to protect as much of the high value for the print product was really a mistaken idea. (B. Koon, interview, May 3, 2011)

This issue of cannibalizing is tied to the issue of profitability (or lack thereof), because organizations have finite resources, and many of the respondents, including Tony Pederson, felt that the people defending the print product’s content were doing so to protect its profits:

...The other argument was, look, we’re not charging people a dime to access the Internet. Our people who pay, at that time, 16 or 17 dollars a month to have their newspaper delivered every morning.... those people deserve the absolute best journalism we can have, and they deserve the breaking news. (T. Pederson, interview, March 25, 2011)

However, many of the respondents cited ways to secure resources for their innovation projects, despite an attitude that was generally oppositional to assisting the new media’s development. In D.C., Retha Hill found herself playing rounds of “Let’s Make A Deal” to secure content for the website:

...One of the ways that I got the international editor to allow us to use some of their content early and to occasionally let some of the international reporters answer questions, was, I explained to him, you know your reporters over in Africa or Europe or wherever, they can actually see their content online...And the editor was like, you mean I don’t have to ship bundles of the newspaper to them in whatever God forsaken place they were, and it would take two weeks for them to get it? And it was like no; they can see what they wrote today, tonight. If you give me the copy early. So you had to make all these bargains with people. (R. Hill, interview, July 12, 2011)

Hill ran into the most serious opposition when attempting to get copy from large, “Sunday-style” investigative series early:

You don’t want to do a five-part series on Sunday and then have to run around trying to find assets to make it more enhanced. You know like photo galleries, and stuff like that. So we would ask, can we get it a few days in advance so that we can
start doing the enhancements? I mean you almost had to like ransom your first born and be like, WE PROMISE we aren’t going to put it up before Sunday. We just need the copy so we can see what you’re writing about and we can go find additional information. And it was like, my god, here’s a pint of blood, can I get it back after Sunday when you see I didn’t put the story up. (R. Hill, interview, July 12, 2011)

Rather than having to engage in quarrels over when content would or would not go online, one of the subjects cited clear-cut policy planning as his publication’s answer to the dispute. At the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis, Steve Yelvington and his colleagues developed *modus operandi* for online publishing:

> And literally, before we launched...this is a Star Tribune way of doing things, they like to have meetings, they like to have everything planned out beforehand, they like to have policies, written before they do things...so we wrote a policy. And the policy was very simple. It was: for any story that was breaking, and a story that we did not dig up an invent through our own investigations, it’s happening, the information behind the story is generally in the public domain, and we know enough about it to answer the five W’s, the basics, and we’re confident in our knowledge, there is an expectation that the reported is going to write it immediately, and turn in the basics immediately, and we’ll get that online as quickly as we can process it. So with that policy in place, and supported by the editor, and the metro editor, and the assistant city editors, it becomes pretty clear to the reporters that’s what’s going to happen. (S. Yelvington, interview, July 1, 2011)

Yelvington and the Star Tribune followed this clear-cut policy planning with measures to ensure that the polices were followed.

> And the other thing we did...we put one of our online people, the online operation was physically separated, but we had one of our staffers that sat in the newsroom and was responsible for making this happen. Which might involve arm-twisting, or it might involve taking dictation and doing a rewrite. And Jackie Crosby, who did that, was one of our people that we hired externally. She had a broadcast background, but she had won a Pulitzer Prize as a print reporter. And she had a lot of credibility that came out of that, and she had the sense of immediacy that broadcasting has, and she was able to make this happen...and we were always competitive with and usually ahead of the broadcast media in terms of breaking story online. (S. Yelvington, interview, July 1, 2011)

The “champions of change” theme Yelvington mentions was one present in several of the subjects’ responses. Fred Mann found that even if the individual who was openly
embracing innovation was not in a leadership position, if he or she was well respected in
the newsroom, that was enough. He recalled a scenario from 1998 when a fellow editor at
the *Philadelphia Inquirer* told him about a big series they were about to start running. As
the head of the online division, Mann suggested that the online team cooperate on the
piece:

...Help plan how this was done, think about multimedia, think about different pieces
of this that can really shine online. And the piece that Mark Bowden was doing was a
piece called Blackhawk Down...And it was a great experience because we had one of
online editors in all their planning meetings, making suggestions, figuring out what
pieces we could put online...And Bowden found that he was really helped by it being
online. He'd run a few parts and he'd get email, and he'd answer all the email...he
would get the soldiers involved. They'd see this online, and they'd give him leads of
other things write about, and he thought this was just fabulous, instant feedback, in
the midst of writing his series. So when we published Blackhawk Down we won all
these awards, all these online awards, for journalism, in addition to the other praise
that Mark got for the print series, and we would include video interviews that Mark
had done, outtakes with different soldiers, a whole lot of stuff. Stuff that today was
kind of routine but back then it was not. But Mark’s embrace of this being online
was huge in the newsroom. Because he was a major reporter, and people saw it, and
he was saying look I’m getting a lot of accolades. You guys are nuts if you’re not
playing along with the online stuff here. So it was finding some champions like that
really helped considerably. (F. Mann, interview, May 26, 2011)

Bowden’s *Blackhawk Down* series later became a book and eventually was adapted into a
DISCUSSION

The managers’ responses identify several factors that made a publication more or less likely to experiment successfully online, as well as a few factors that made it much more likely that the efforts would experience the pitfalls outlined in the literature review. They also shed light on the way that industry culture, historical development of the print medium, and an entrenched commitment to routinization impacted the way that new media developed in newsrooms. Overall, similar to the work of Shashank & Hollifield, the responses indicate “the innovation-management process by newspapers was relatively haphazard, involving low-levels of research, resource commitment, involvement by the editorial department, or use of cross-functional teams” (Shashank & Hollifield, 2002). However, despite this general degree of discombobulation, the responses also point to a number of tactics that, at a micro-level, represent a very clear understanding of how to implement innovation in a media company, particularly one predicated on an extremely mature technology (print).

The issue of geography is a factor that is related to culture and can impact (positively or negatively) the likelihood that a company will engage in attempts to innovate with full commitment. A newspaper that covers as one of its main narratives companies that are experimenting with new technologies and succeeding has the good fortune of having some of the uncertainty with regard to innovation reduced. This is illustrated particularly well in Bob Ryan’s comment about the Silicon Valley environment and its effects on the SJMN, because not only does Ryan posit that geography played a major role, he also links it to the relationship that the paper’s leadership had with those in the high-tech industry. Newspaper companies, by their nature, are not technology companies.
Unlike technology firms, they don’t have large staffs of people whose sole task is to develop innovation and experiment with emerging technology. So, in this case, Ryan is saying that leadership at the SJMC used the tech industry in Silicon Valley as a de facto research and development arm of the newspaper.

This is not to say that it is impossible for a paper in a geographic location that is not surrounded by a progressive business and technology environment can’t be successful experimenting with innovation, but the presence of that environment reduces some of the perceived risk that goes hand-in-hand with embracing disruptive technologies.

It is clear from the responses that the existence of an individual in a leadership position that champions the cause for innovation and provides enthusiasm for the project is extremely valuable. Their elevated status within the company is vital to the innovation process in several ways. They should feel a greater deal of security in their career and be more likely to take risks and make proposals that lack predictable results, an inherent aspect of innovation. Also, the fact that someone with a known track record of success is attaching his or her name to a new idea is invaluable in selling the idea in lower levels of the organization. At the agenda-setting stage, where the organization assesses the technology and decides how to and whether or not to approach it, having a person who is generally open to, and looking for, new ways to solve problems (both old and new) will help the process greatly.

The main reason those individuals are so valuable is because the issue with new technologies is often that they present different attributes than mature technologies, and it is vital that different not be instantly looked at negatively. If someone in charge is championing new aspects of technology, those individuals who actually work with the
innovation will be more likely to look for fresh, valuable ways to use the technology to accomplish the organization’s goals.

Scanning both the technology and the organization for ways they can interact is at the heart of successful innovation. Hill’s tactic of simply taking a floppy disk to City Hall and downloading all of that week’s legislation so that it could be published and previewed online is very simple, but it offers a valuable, previously non-existent service to the reader. Holding chat sessions with restaurant critics and columnists who cover government, which Hill also mentions in her responses, is another example of looking at what the technology offers. The technology can enable the organization to provide a service or feature to customers that they will hopefully come to value in the same way that they value the mature news source; i.e. the physical newspaper.

Another notion present in the responses has to do with where, within an organization, exists support for an idea. Individuals in leadership positions are obviously important, but often times it is important to note if ideas are coming from technical-types of employees. As Koon noted, the idea for a March Madness bracket came from an engineer who had just learned something new about Netscape and its capabilities. This is the process of attempting to “examine internal disagreements over the developments of new products or technologies” (Bower & Christensen, 1995).

Several of the respondents’ statements make it clear that in addition to taking advantage of the ability to post large documents and thereby bring readers closer to the sources, many of them also understood how the medium would bring readers closer to one another. Newspapers have always performed the action of facilitating discussion within a community, but several of the subjects stated that in the early days, they saw this as the
primary function of their online products. Setser’s comments that she saw the online effort as “more of an extension than a replacement,” is a very clear understanding of the agenda-setting stage (Rogers, 2003). This simple but focused statement laying out the intentions of online efforts was present among the respondents whose publications experimented the most. So, it is desirable for those managing innovation to have a clear vision of what they would like the new technology to be, but not to be constrained by that vision. Deciding that the online product is going to “more of an extension than a replacement” and a “community-building thing” sets the context for experimentation. The types of ideas tried by Hill come out of this sort of focused scanning at the assessment stage.

It’s clear from the subjects’ responses that a certain geographic location near an environment that welcomes forward-thinking business practices can make a media company more likely to experiment with innovation. Also apparent is the fact that having an employee or employees who are particularly excited about innovating in a position of power makes a company more likely to embrace new technologies. This individual sets the tone for a focused assessment of the emerging technology, which in turn helps the organization develop a clearer idea of what it wants to do with the new medium (in this case, online). With that vision more fleshed out, experimentation is more likely to be in line with what customers (readers) are looking for from the product.

The literature review stated that a culture that was anti-innovation existed in many newsrooms during the time period in question. Based on the subject’s responses, how prevalent was this attitude and how did it affect attempts at innovation? How did status level impact one’s willingness to embrace or resist change?
Conventional wisdom may hold that younger people are more open to technological change and better understand its uses. While this may be the case, it doesn’t necessarily mean that those people understand the process of innovation better, only that they understand the tools better. The process of innovation is one that requires fitting the technology to the organization, and without a keen understanding of the organization and its goals and culture, younger employees may lack the insight and experience to match their technological know-how with the needs of the audience.

Another telling response with regard to how career paths impact the way the industry approaches innovation comes from Dick Van Helsema. He spent time in several different functional silos of the newspaper business, always looking for the next area in which technology would allow him to excel. This is a unique (and, for lack of a better word, innovative) career path, but it also highlights the reasons he as an individual is better to work on emerging technologies with uncertainty attached. By seeing the business from many different angles, he has a keen understanding of the entire process and understands where innovation fits in that process. By regularly changing functions, he also learned how to adapt quickly to uncertain circumstances and develop new processes quickly. On the whole, as he points out, the media industry rewarded people for becoming very capable at one thing, and that breeds a need for stability.

That desire for predicted outcomes is present not only when speaking of career paths, but also with regard to how the flow of work is delegated, managed and accomplished. It should be noted here that these refined processes served the purpose of providing a needed level of order to a work environment that otherwise would be unmanageable.
At the root of the dispute over disrupted workflow is the shift to a 24-hour news cycle that required news organizations to either drastically change the way they managed their operations or face extinction. Cable news operations began to gain traction during this same era, and their embrace of this new around-the-clock news cycle began to render print’s ability to break news non-existent. This shift and its importance in the context of why newspapers had a tough time adapting to changes in publishing technology cannot be overstated.

Related to this issue of workflow is the potential negative impact of having individuals who are still handling full workloads centered on the established technology managing the innovation processes. The cases of Setser and Sullivan are impressive in that they self-trained and expanded their publications’ reach almost single-handedly, but to fully engage what an emerging technology has to offer (and to keep employees sane), a different individual should be tasked with planning for the launch of an entirely new product.

In addition to the issue of figuring out how to manage workflow for the online product, newspapers had to determine how exactly they wanted their presence online to look and feel. This determination is more than a simple aesthetic one; it is an issue that gets right to the heart of what the publication is trying to accomplish by putting content online. Tony Pederson’s response that the Houston Chronicle struggled with how to give its online content “that newspaper feel” runs afoul of Rogers’ suggestions (Rogers, 2003). While it is understandable that managers want to maintain the “feel” of the established technology when designing the new, this approach undoubtedly limits the organizations ability to fully embrace the aspects offered by the emerging technology. Readers can get a newspaper
“feel” by reading a newspaper. This is not to say that the online product shouldn’t strive to maintain the credibility and reliability of the print product, but attempting to achieve that by simply copying and pasting the newspaper wastes the value offered by the new media. Chris Jennewein’s response indicated that those planning for the Mercury Center knew that breaking news needed to be the focus of the site, and that there needed to be a window on the first page with headlines. This is a perfect example of taking the organization’s objectives (disseminating breaking news to as many readers as possible) and finding ways that they can be achieved more efficiently by using a new technology (making headlines the focus of the online product, which can be updated immediately).

Outside of disputes over workflow, concerns over diverting content and resources from the print product in an attempt to grow the online product were the most often cited in the responses. Based on the literature review, this is to be expected. The emerging technology has no customer base, and in the case of online news, no proven business model by which to generate profits. Prohibiting the new technology from drawing on the resources the organization already has (print content), and then underfunding the venture because it will not generate the same profits the established technology does is a recipe for failure.

It is clear from the subjects’ responses, and from the literature review, that the types of conflict that arise within an organization during the process of innovation are fairly predictable. While Hill’s tactics of bartering and begging the newsroom for content were essential given her situation, they are not ideal. Yelvington’s response, which details the Star Tribune’s practice of holding pre-launch meetings to write out clear policies, is a great example of proper execution of the processes recommend in the management literature.
(Rogers, 2003; Day, Shoemaker, & Gunther, 2000). They recognized that a large part of what made the new media unique was the ability to immediately and constantly update (agenda-setting), wrote out well-defined policies stating how content management would be handled internally (matching), and kept the people working on the online product separate save for one respected individual to serve as a liaison between established and emerging. This arrangement reduces the amount of workflow disruption that print reporters experience, and ultimately affects the way their attitudes toward embracing new media develop. They do not have to do too much extra work, and they have a respected colleague helping them to understand the value of the new media. This is also evident in Fred Mann’s response regarding Mark Bowden’s Blackhawk Down series. Bowden was doing something that many traditional reporters saw as the highest calling in reporting: a multi-part investigative series driven by narrative. By welcoming leaders of the online team with open arms (rather than keeping them in the dark until the last minute), Bowden was able to enhance his story-telling capabilities in a manner that would have been impossible had it only been published in print.
CONCLUSION

I think that whole period was a time of terribly exciting disruption.

*Bruce Koon*

The process of managing and implementing innovation is undoubtedly very difficult in an organizational setting. Management literature outlines the pitfalls one can (and likely will) face when an organization that deals in an established technology attempts to embrace an emerging one. Mass media literature confirms that newspaper companies experienced all of the familiar conflicts and issues in their attempt to publish content online. In fact, the literature states that the media industry experienced a greater deal of disruption due to technological innovation than almost any other during the end of the 20th century. This was due in part to a culture that developed within the industry that was oppositional to innovation. Because of this culture, the newspaper business as a whole did not engage in the type of honest assessment of the new technology espoused in the management literature. The responses given by the subjects in this research confirm this notion. Once the technology was improperly assessed, it was improperly innovated because decision makers failed to see the new media’s potential value. Most people in the industry did not experience the same type of realization that one of the respondents, Gina Setser, did. Setser was attending a training session on computer usage and the Internet at the University of Missouri in the early ‘90s:

...As someone from the non-academic world, but a media world, stepping into that, and seeing it as kind of an “oh sh*t!” moment...this thing, whatever it is, is going to upend what I do for a living.” (G. Setser, personal communication, May 18, 2011)

In an organizational setting, it is important to identify and listen to the people who are having “oh sh*t!” moments, give them the tools and resources they need to investigate their
ideas, and be sensitive to the fact that individuals who are accustomed to a highly routinized workflow can be serious roadblocks to change.
BIO QUESTION

In 2000, I joined the SJ Merc news, as online team leader. Based in the newsroom. Team of 3 we worked as liaisons between the newsroom and web producers for Merc NEWS DOT COM. Our job was to explain web producers and their needs to the print people, and explain the print stuff to the web people. Then we also oversaw posted news throughout the day, from the print side onto the website throughout the day and night.

WHEN YOU GOT THAT POSITION DID YOU HAVE ANY HISTORY OR INVOLVEMENT IN ONLINE NEWS BEFORE? AT PREVIOUS JOBS?

No. Not at all. My previous online experience was just like anybody, I had an AOL account. I was enamored with the web. I kind of felt the web was the direction journalism was headed, and figured this was an opportunity for me to kind of learn it. But I had no web experience. I had been a managing editor of a small paper in Northern California.

AND YOU THOUGHT THE WEB WOULD BE THE NEXT THING, BUT DO YOU THINK THAT ATTITUDE WAS COMMON?

No not at all. I think most print side people thought that this was a toy, a diversion. They didn’t know what to think of it, but they didn’t think that this was going to, in any way, supplant the daily newspaper that came out once a day. They just didn’t see it. And that was even by 2000.

AND THAT CHANGES THE WAY THEY APPROACH THE MEDIUM, HOW?

Among the print side people there was, you know, just to get somebody to do a story…. let’s say there was a fire, and it destroyed 5 homes, and they sent a reporter out to cover it, and the reporter went out to cover it. To get that reporter to write five paragraphs to put up online was a struggle. Not only from the reporter but also from the editors point of view. It
was just a struggle. They didn't have all the information, it was not a priority, the priority was the newspaper, so it was a real struggle, and they just didn’t see why we should do this.

SO WHEN YOU WERE GIVEN YOUR MARCHING ORDERS AS THE HEAD OF THIS TEAM, WAS THE IDEA OF NOT CANNIBALIZING THE PRINT PRODUCT BROUGHT UP? EXPLAIN.

That’s a good term, cannibalizing the print product. And no, I was not told that I could not cannibalize the print product. In fact, the folks that I worked for that hired me, wanted us to cannibalize the print product, they wanted to get more of the print product. Basically, I was told that I was going to be an unenviable position, because the print people would be angry at me because I had to get them to think differently, and the web people, they were…the person who had my job before, they were very frustrated with her because she wouldn’t champion their cause of "let’s get something early, let’s get something first, let’s rewrite headlines so that they work for the web and not just the newspaper, so, they just basically told me you’re not going to be real popular.

DO YOU THINK THAT THERE WERE ANY DIFFERENT DEPARTMENTS OR AREAS WITHIN THE PAPER THAT WERE MORE OR LESS EXCITED, OR THAT YOU WERE MORE OR LESS POPULAR WITH THAN OTHERS?

I would say that…especially in San Jose, the business section, and the reporters that covered technology were very open and very excited, and very cooperative. Designers were very excited, and very cooperative. The people that were most recalcitrant were the traditional metro reporters and metro editors. The features people weren't all that excited, so the more that you worked with designs, and had a feel for graphics, the more excited. Tech guys and designers were pretty pro.

SO WHEN YOU GOT THE POSITION...WAS THERE EVER A DISCUSSION ABOUT WHAT’S GONNA BE DIFFERENT ON THE WEBSITE THAN IN THE PAPER, OR WAS IT ALL THOUGHT OF AS ONE? WAS IT CONSIDERED WHAT IT COULD DO FOR YOU THAT THE PRINT PRODUCT COULDN’T?
depends on whom you talk to. if i was working with the web producers, absolutely there were discussions about what we wanted, and how it was different from the print product. they wanted things early, they didn't mind if things were incomplete because we could update frequently, headlines had to be written differently...i had not heard of seo, but it made sense. you wrote a headline that was direct and had keywords in the headline. so those things, were very much discussed on the website. on the print side, it was we can give you 2 or 3 paragraphs, you're gonna have to write your own headlines, we're not going to give you a different headline, or, you can't have the story until the copy desk has gone through it several time. so, they were like, we're not going to do anything extra for the web.

and were you told anything about how profitable your web operation needed to be at any point?

no. i would say that in what’s called the "legacy" media, if you were in the newsroom, you never talked about profitability, or ad revenues, or anything like that. middle management did not talk about that, wasn't in the game plan. now, on the website, the web producers not only handled editorial copy, but they also handled placement of web ads and all that. they may have been in tune to revenue streams than print, but that was never within my daily worries.

and then, since you said you had a pretty lehmans familiarity with the web before being hired, we're you asked to go to any conferences or anything like that, or any particular literature on guidelines as to how to implement a new product?

the web producers taught me how to do the content management. a couple of content management training sessions. got dreamweaver. we needed to upload photos, so we got photoshop...the news side wouldn't buy us photoshop for our laptops, we wanted to use laptops, so we used our own laptops because they wouldn't buy us laptops. so we learned a
little HTML, and all that. And one of the online team members showed me how to do that.

So it was basically, here’s our content management system, learn it, and figure it out.

SO THAT’S ALL TECHNICAL TYPE TRAINING, BUT WHAT ABOUT ANY MARKET RESEARCH TYPE STUFF, MAYBE WITH PEOPLE THAT WERE ALREADY SUBSCRIBERS ASKING THEM…WOULD THEY USE IT, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO USE IT FOR?

No, I don’t know any thing about that.

IN THE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT WHAT DIRECTIONS TO GO WITH THE SITE, DO YOU FEEL ANY CERTAIN PEOPLE’S OPINIONS WERE HEARD MORE…YOUNGER PEOPLE’S OPINIONS MAYBE DISCOUNTED SOME, EVEN THOUGH THEY MAY HAVE HAD A BETTER IDEA OF HOW TO USE THE TECHNOLOGY?

Absolutely. Younger reporters and copy editors and designers, we’re much younger than editors and a lot of the reporters…they had lots of ideas about what should be on the website, and how to use it, and usually they were more eager to, oh hey I’m doing this, 3 paragraphs, more eager to get there stuff on the site, more eager to try blogs more eager to put stuff on the end of their story that said like, go to the website for updates. The younger you were easier to work with the online team.

SO DO YOU THINK AROUND 2000, THERE WAS A NOTICEABLE DIFFERENCE FROM HOW IT WAS IN 1995?

At the SJMN, around 1995, you had to make a decision, as a layman coming to the web how was I going to get onto the web. You could go through AOL or Compuserve. Both were dial ups at the time. I went with AOL, because a friend told me that it was the easiest to use if you’ve never gotten on the web. But also, AOL had something called Newsstand. And I was a big fan of the New Republic at the time, but I never had time to read it and I had all these New Republic magazines stacking up. And I could get the New Republic online from AOL, but I had to pay for it. So, that’s why I chose AOL. AOL and the SJMN started an online newspaper, and the site was called Mercury Center. If you wanted MC, you had to be an
AOL customer. And so basically, some of the publications already had a pay wall. And, MC basically just uploaded every story that was in the paper that day. I don’t even know if they had photographs. But it was the same headline in the paper, the same story, nothing was different. I think it was only done once a day. But that was the first iteration. And, everybody at the Mercury News though that this was the hottest thing, that they were on the cutting edge, and they probably were. By the time I joined in 2000, they had some reporters who were doing blogs, not a lot, but they had become a little bit more sophisticated. They had changed Mercury Center to mercury news dot com. you could get it outside of the AOL pay wall, it was free. And you had some people who were really on board with this, and thought it was cool. But you had most of the reporters that weren’t on board with it. They just thought it was something extra they had to do during the day. They just, "you know, I’m so busy that I can’t fool around with this." And there were certain barriers, you know "you cannot post anything until the copy editor reads it." well the copy editor may not come in until 4 o clock. Or, "you can’t change the headline." well, your headline is great with these puns, but nobody will find your headline on the Internet without any key words in it. So the website was looked at I would think, as kind of a toy for a group of people. The assisting managing who oversaw it, a few people who used it - reporters, like I said the tech people.... they had something called "Good Morning Silicon Valley." which was an email blast that went out about, oh 7 or 8 AM, to tech folks, and was very well received. And also had a companion site called Silicon Valley dot COM, which was business news and all of that. So the business section was on board...but everyone still did not embrace it.
BUT IT STILL SOUNDS LIKE, HAVING A PRODUCT ONLINE BY 1995, THEY WERE STILL PRETTY AHEAD OF THE CURVE. WHY DO YOU THINK THAT WAS THE CASE?

Because we’re in Silicon Valley. And also the Bay Area. You know, the whole dot com boom, people here really got it. And so yeah, it was ahead of the curve. When I was up at the paper in Morin, I would hire young reporters just out of grad school. I remember one reporter, she had just come from Columbia, she decided to come from the Bay Area to look for a job. Because there were many newspapers in the region with a circulation level of say, 40,000 or above. And she thought that was a sophistication level that was good for her and all that. She was covering night cops, some city council meetings. And, she quit, and she told me she was going to a dot com in San Francisco called chick flick dot com...and was going to be making as much money as I was as the managing editor of this paper. So, there was something going on. And you could see it going on. There was a big site called, I think, Red Herring, and they had print and online. And the online stuff was going great gun. So the dot com boom, that whole atmosphere, was going on in the bay area So I think a lot of newspapers here jumped on the band wagon. So, the chronicle with SF gate...The Well, it was one of the 1st online communities. So there was a lot going on here, and I think that’s the main reason the Mercury News was a little ahead of the curve.

SO OUTSIDE OF LOCATION, HOW MUCH DOES UPPER MANAGEMENT ATTITUDE HAVE TO DO WITH DEVELOPMENT AND THE PROCESS USED?

Upper management has a lot to do with it. When I interviewed at the MN for the online team leader position, the publisher was on board with this, the executive editor was on board, the assistant managing editor that I reported to, who was really tech savvy, was on board with it. So, there was a lot of support there. And they were the ones who told me that it was going to be a tough job, because, even though I had their backing, there were going to
be a lot of editors that I would come into contact with day to day, who were, "meh" or, "I'm not thinking about this." but, yeah, the upper management support was very important. If they thought it was important, it was going to be done.

Tony Pederson – Interview conducted on March 25, 2011

BIO QUESTION

Well in 90s, I was executive editor and senior VP for the Houston Chronicle. And during that time, just like just about everybody else we established an online product. And put the thing up, and then I left the industry in June of 03 and came here.

SO WHEN DID HCHRON FIRST PUT A PRODUCT ONLINE?

I think 93, 94, in there. And I think that’s when most of the big papers started.

DESCRIBE FOR ME WHAT YOU THINK THE ATTITUDE WAS IN HOUSTON TOWARD THE LAUNCH OF THAT PRODUCT?

Well, ours was driven by the marketing and sales people. That was not particularly unusual, and in fact it was marketing and sales that made most of the decisions early on, in terms of putting the product online and not charging anything.

AND HOW WAS THAT RECEIVED IN THE NEWSROOM?

I think in the newsroom, we had some misgivings about it, and I think there were some other editors who had some misgiving about it. But honestly, there were several issues that...you know the marketing people made some pretty strong arguments. And their key argument was that, Look, we've got this tremendous classified base, and classified is going to be a huge part of why people access the product online. And, again, this was before Monster, eBay, before Craigslist...and we didn’t see Autotrader coming, we didn't see Realtor dot com coming, and we thought we had this nice big fat virtual monopoly on
classified, and that things were always gonna be great. And that was a huge miscalculation. And the larger miscalculation in my opinion, and I think all newspaper companies, that the newspaper was simply a new medium coming online. What it was a fundamental shift in the culture of how people accessed information and how they communicated, and in 94 95 I don’t think anybody really saw that. And so that’s what led to the really difficult mistakes about putting the product online for free.

DID PEOPLE IN THE NEWSROOM REALIZE THE VALUE OF THE PRODUCT BUT JUST NOT WANT IT GIVEN AWAY FOR FREE?

Well I think we felt like the medium was going to make an impact, but again, we couldn’t foresee some of the changes coming that were going to dramatically affect the revenues of the newspaper. And, I mean, of course it was a real cataclysm that came starting in 2004, 05. And basically the medium had matured by the point, and newspapers were left holding a lot of empty bags. So, it’s always easy to look back and second-guess, hindsight is perfect on what newspapers should have done, but honestly, as bad as the decisions seem now, there were elements to the decision that made since 15 years ago.

HOW MUCH PROFITIBILITY SOLD AS A NEED, DID THE PRODUCT HAVE TO BE CONTRIBUTING TO THE BOTTOM LINE RIGHT AWAY?

No honestly that was not much of a consideration. Newspaper companies tended to fund some expansion, and fund some additional positions. Based on the idea that we have to make some investment to get this thing up, and then we’ll kind of see where it goes. Of course, it was easy to do in 1994, 95 because newspaper profits were real fat. It became much less of a factor later on when newspaper profits starting getting squeezed.

SO WITH REGARD TO DIVERTING RESOURCES TO THE NEW MEDIUM, WAS IT VIEWED AS, IN SOME WAY, AS CANNIBALIZING THE PRNT PRODUCT, THE “CASH COW” OF THE COMPANY?
Yeah I think the editorial people felt that that was a danger all along. But again, we were in such uncharted territory, I don’t think anyone was willing to fall on their sword to make that a real statement. Plus again, newspapers were making such huge profits; we thought we had some leeway in the matter. In 1995 I don’t think you could look…big newspapers were making 25, 27 percent profits. I don’t think anyone said, we need to be cautious about this, because newspapers could be a little bit aggressive.

**CAN YOU DESCRIBE FOR ME THE DEVELOPMENT, OVER TIME, IN THE WAY THE MEDIUM WAS PERCEIVED? AND ALSO HOW PRACTICES CHANGED?**

Well, what newspapers did, and certainly what the chronicle did, was basically just put the paper up online. And we had a few interactive features, but the whole idea was basically to put the newspaper up online. And we didn’t really know how to make it look; we didn’t know how to give it that newspaper feel. And of course the idea of constant updates, when it first went up, nobody was thinking about that. Because the whole idea was that the print product drove the online product. And it wasn’t until maybe 6 years ago that newspapers started to change, and it became that the online product was the important product. And it drove the print product. And, in those early days, you had some real Luddites, some real skeptics about the whole idea. I mean, if it didn’t appear on newsprint, it just didn’t have any validity to it. And the idea of a newspaper updating stuff and getting stuff online…I remember the first discussion about, if you had a really good breaking news story, why don’t you put it online at 4 o’clock in the afternoon and not until the next days print editions. That was a revolutionary development, and that was as recently as the late 90s, and again...to that, you had the naysayers who said “this is crazy, it doesn’t’ really have any integrity and credibility with the public, unless it appears in the print product.” Well, all of that has gone by the wayside now, I think, everybody understands what the issue is. But
again, looking back as recently as 97, 98...it was a valid point of discussion. You didn’t have the first blogs until 98.

DO YOU THINK ONE OF THE BIGGEST POINTS IN DEFENDING THE PRINT PRODUCT WAS THAT PERCEIVED TRUST WITHIN THE PRODUCT?

Yeah, there was that, and the other argument was, Look, we’re not charging people a dime to access the Internet. Our people who pay, at that time, 16 or 17 dollars a month to have their newspaper delivered every morning. Those people deserve the absolute best journalism we can have, and they deserve the breaking news. And so there was a little bit of a conflict over the people who were accessing it for nothing, and those who were paying by subscription for the newspaper.

WITHIN THE PAPER...AS FAR AS THAT “LUDDITE” CHARACTERIZATION...DO YOU FEEL ANY DEPARTMENTS WITHIN THE PAPER WHO DIFFERENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS IT?

That’s an interesting question. I think in terms of the editorial department of the newspaper, the news sections, I think it was just about everywhere and it probably broke down more by age than by any particular assignment within the newspaper. The older people of course were very skeptical. And they remembered, going back to the 60s and 70s, there had been many experiments with delivering text electronically that had all failed miserably. So they had at least some background. The young people didn’t, and they tended to be more computer literate.

DO YOU THINK THAT OVER THAT PERIOD TIME THAT CHANGED AT ALL, WHERE MAYBE IN LATER YEARS THE OLDER PEOPLE ADOPTED THE ATTITUDE OF THE YOUNGER PEOPLE? SCANNING FOR MAYBE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF MEDIUM?

I think gradually it did change. And, it started changing dramatically that there was going to be an economic impact here, and it may not be a good thing for newspapers.
ALSO, OVER TIME, DO YOU THINK THERE BECAME A CLEARER IDEA OF WHAT YOU’D LIKE TO DO WITH THE PRODUCT? A “VISION” OR HOW IT WAS DIFFERENT FROM PRINT?
That didn’t happen until late 90s...when it went up the majority of people’s attitude was, “we just need to get this paper up online and see what happens.” I don’t think there was anything like any vision of an online newspaper or any concept of an online newspaper at all.

Dawn Garcia – Interview conducted on April 7, 2011

BIO QUESTION

In 1990 I was a reporter for San Fran Chronicle. Then in 1992, I became state editor at SJ Merc news, then city editor of Merc News...then assistant managing editor in charge of Metro. The first product that Mercury News put online was called Mercury Center. It was the online arm of Mercury News. There was an audio telephone news service was called Newshound. Mercury Center was one of first online newspapers. Small staff. Main newsroom staff worked with that staff to post value-added content. In the early 90s.

WHY DID THEY SEEM TO UNDERSTAND VALUE ADDED NATURE OF MEDIUM, AND WHY WE’RE THEY IN SO EARLY?

Mercury News WAS based in Silicon Valley. It’s an area of innovation. Second, the Mercury News was a very ambitious newspaper. Not a giant paper. Regional newspaper. Supported in this by Knight Ridder. Always aimed very high, and was experimental. More so than a lot of traditional newspaper. Part of that comes from leadership of the paper. Editor was an innovative, inventor kind of guy. And he liked to try things. He was very proud of the newshound audio idea. He really infused a lot of enthusiasm into this process, and he let people try thinks. So I think all those things together, and some other people under him
helped create this environment where that could happen. Even though it was in Silicon Valley, and he exhibited that excitement, what was the general feeling or position among people who weren’t supportive of the idea? I think early on people were still trying to figure out what it was, and how it would fit in with daily newsgathering and the print newspaper. But, I think it was seen as cool. There was not at the time as much pressure to produce web stories that there is now, so I think people were interested in it. What it might mean for journalism. It was fun, also, because editors and reporters, who started to see that value in it, and the potential, would take it and think about, well, what if we posted video, what if we posted all the documents we gathered for this story so we could show people how we came to this conclusion. So that was done in a pretty organic way, in a collaborative way with the very small web staff. At least one or two enthusiastic young people who knew how to do the web, and the newsroom did not. How to put stories on the web. Started growing to where people felt like Merc Center was part of the newspaper. And that’s really important because there was a time when that changed dramatically and, I think, to the detriment of the Merc News efforts online. It’s important for readers of the Merc News, who feel that is their newspaper, when they read the Merc News website, it’s important for them to feel that is their website. People need to feel ownership of their paper.

GIVEN HOW OUT IN FRONT YOUR PUBLICATION WAS IN EMBRACING THE MEDIUM, DID YOU FEEL THERE WAS A CLEAR VISION FOR THE PRODUCT?

It was experiment but not an experiment we thought would be a flash in the pan. They invested in it, they advertised it, it had logos, and it was very much a part of the company.

WITHIN THE PAPER, ANY CERTAIN DEPTS, NOTICEABLY MORE/LESS RECEPIENTIVE?

In the newsroom, I had nothing to do with advertising. But the people who liked it most in the newsroom were people with projects. It wasn’t so much seeing the breaking news
value, it was more people with projects would want to put up extra materials onto the site.

HOW MUCH WAS THE TOPIC OF PROFITABILITY DISCUSSED?

I don’t know that profitability was that big of a deal. We were in the dot com boom, and Merc News was making money hand over fist. Not a lot of concern about money. The main focus of the newspaper was excellence. Journalistic excellence. Certainly people above me were thinking of how to make money, but there weren’t discussion in the newsroom about that.

DID YOU FEEL THAT GIVEN THE NEWSNESS OF THE TECHNOLOGY, WERE CERTAIN PEOPLE’S IDEAS AND OPINIONS VALUED MORE OR LESS GIVEN THEIR AGE AND/OR STATUS LEVEL?

I think for people who worked with Merc Center, being younger was fine because they knew things that older people didn’t know. The web was still pretty new.

ANY EFFORT TO REACH OUT TO COLLEAGUES FROM OTHER PUBLICATIONS, TO SEE WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN WORKING/NOT WORKING FOR THEM?

Remind me...as the web arm of the Merc News becomes more of a standard feature, and their was more of push to put breaking news on the web, some reporters inside the Merc News...the younger reporters saw the value of getting their story up on the web early. And, the veteran reporters were worried about scooping themselves. And that conversation happened in newspapers all over. And, the fact that you were having to do a web story in addition to a print story. Not a battle, but a conversation. Some grumbling. Should we hold these stories, etc.? We’re past that now, mostly.

DO YOU THINK THAT OVER THE PAST 5-10 YEARS, THAT THERE’S BEEN A SEA CHANGE TO WHERE OLDER REPORTERS AND EDITORS ARE EMBRACING THAT INNOVATIVE APPROACH, DO THEY FULLY UNDERSTAND THE VALUE?

All journalists see the value of the web, but it’s gotten more complex, because I think in the beginning, newspapers didn’t know what to do with it. So now, economy has changed,
chaos and opportunity...lots of jobs lost, most people in newsrooms having to do more with less, so, you’re having reporters we do not only web stories but video, and podcasts, and for some people that’s exciting and fun, and for some people, especially people who are used to doing the print story, it’s overwhelming. a real conversation going on about: is it a good idea for everyone to do everything? Maybe it’s not. Maybe some people are much better at doing this or that only. So they may see the value, but it’s still about whether or not they particularly want to be doing it.

DID GEOGRAPHY IMPACT NOT PERCIEVING IT AS A THREAT?

I think in newsrooms...here at Stanford, I see a lot of trends in journalism because I see who applies and sort of what they’re talking about in their applications...and I’m always surprised when I see...well, generally, people who apply for this program are not the curmudgeons. But there are still occasionally those people who give you that feeling when they apply that they wish for the old days. And you know, the old days are gone. As good as they were in some ways. And so the pitched battled in the newsroom I think happened certainly, in some newsrooms, longer than others. And I think because of silicon valley and because of the Mercury News and the West Coast in general being more experimental, I’m always surprised to hear that some of these conversations are still going on in the middle of the country or in the East, because it’s pretty past that now. You know, the Web is here, it’s not about trying to figure out how to pay for the journalism we need, whether than, gee, are we going to do stories online and podcasts and all that. There’s no longer any question.
BIO QUESTION

In 1992, was an election year, and I was at the San Francisco examiner, I was a special projects editor, and we were just starting at that time at the Examiner looking into new inline things that were beginning to emerge. You have to understand though, this is pre browser, and this is pre Netscape. Online usually met services like AOL, which was just starting up at that time, CompuServe, a lot of these dial up services...bulletin boards and different kinds of introductions to your computers and the ability to begin exchanging type had begun happening.

SO THE EXAMINER WAS THE FIRST PLACE WHERE YOU DEALT WITH THE TECHNOLOGY?

Yeah. I think in the Bay Area, there was the SJMC, and it is actually credited in an AJR review article as the first newspaper to put all of its content, both newspaper stories and classified ads online. And it had a deal with AOL in 92 or 93.

DESCRIBE WHAT THE ATTITUDES WERE AT THE EXAMINER TOWARD THE IDEA OF AN ONLINE EDITION

Most people still didn’t understand it. There was not a very widespread awareness of online. Again, there was movers and pioneers, maybe a handful of people at maybe a handful of newspapers across the country. As I said, the Merc Center, and Night Ridder were definitely some of the pioneers. At the Examiner, we were aware at what they were doing. Our publisher at the time, William Randolph Hearst III who was actually a very tech savvy person, said look into it. So there was probably 3 or 4 of us at the paper who started working on it on our own, and we actually did come up with a prototype called the electric examiner, or examiner dot com. But to answer your question, it was really a sideshow. Most people were not aware of it, or if they were, they had no understanding. I was actually very
surprised, because a year later there was a newspaper strike, and what happened during that newspaper strike. And during that strike the union leaders were saying we had to put out a strike newspaper. And plans were being made to set up Apple computers for a publishing station, and it was going to take us about a week. And I said, you know we could put it on this thing called the Internet and put it up in half a week. So I remember trying to set up this virtual newsroom, and asking people if they were online. And, no joke, people would say yeah, my ticket duty is at 3 o’clock, meaning their picket duty. So, short answer to your question is, we had a sort of license to do these experimentations, but it was not about wholesale change to the newsroom, and their were very few people that actually were online at that time.

WHAT SORT OF RESTRICTIONS WERE YOU WORKING WITH AT THAT TIME?

Those issues of cannibalizing had not developed at that point. Two years later I went to the Merc News, and became managing editor of the Merc Center. And, the SJMC was much further along in developing an online team and an online unit, and an inline product. And they actually had some publishing systems were they were taking the content from the newspaper and with some light copy editing, having it go from the direct publishing system and having it go online. The issue of no cannibalizing, at that paper, had already been resolved. It was understood that content would go online. But again, they were one of the newspapers in the country that were doing that.

WHY DID YOU FEEL THEY WERE SO FAR AHEAD, PARTICULARLY THAN SF, WHICH IS NOT TOO FAR AWAY?

The SJMC was ahead of the game for two reasons. Knight Ridder the company itself actually had a research and innovation unit themselves. They were experimenting in these areas, they had a Videotex experiment where they trying to deliver text electronically, sort of over
a screen. And they had actually developed something that today you would call the iPad, very early on, tablet type thing, that text and newspapers could be delivered digitally. So Knight Ridder was already engaged in that. They're well acknowledged as one of the leaders...there was a handful of thinkers that understood, you know, with developments in technology, information did not have to just be delivered in a print product, you know, made from trees paper. The other huge factor was a man named Bob Ingles. With the notion of AOL starting, Compuserve, there was about half a dozen of these services popping up all over the place. He saw the implication of, well, if you can do email, you can go onto a computer to get info like movie listings and thing, why couldn't you get news. So that was the atmosphere at that time.

WITHIN THE SJMC, DID YOU FEEL THERE WERE ANY DEPARTMENTS THAT WERE PARTICULARLY MORE OR LESS EXCITED ABOUT THE MEDIUM?

At that time, in a typical newsroom, even at a place like the Merc News where they had this online edition being created, it was a sideshow. Again, it's not part of my job, type thing, there's an automatic system that sends material over, but it's not my job. And I'll give you an illustration of that...there was a big breaking news story going on, and some of the copy editors in the newsroom had been assigned to do the tagging so that it could immediately flow on to the AOL site. Merc Center within AOL. And this ongoing story was happening. And I walked in and said, what's going on, and they said, oh they're about to announce the verdict, or whatever it was. And I said, wow, and the copy editor got up and left. And I said, where you going? He said, my shift is over. I laughed and said, yeah, well, we're going to need to get this verdict up online to AOL. So I had to grab the manual book, and figure out how to load this verdict up online myself. So it was not uncommon in newsrooms at the time, that it wasn’t a question of being resistant, it’s that they weren’t even paying attention
to it. Again every paper probably had a half dozen people that said, wow, what is this about, and they were migrating over and either trying to do it on their own, or trying to join the system.

DID ANYONE MAKE A POINT TO DISCUSS PROFITIABLITY WITH YOU AS THE LEADER OF THIS ONLINE TEAM?

Again, in the period, the handful papers that thought it was a good idea to be online were trying to build business models as well. So it’s not going to have to turn a profit, it was-what’s the business model. A lot of this was driven by the recognition that classified ads were going to be vulnerable, and that advertising…I mean classified ads were the real issue for newspapers in that early period. No one quite understood how vulnerable newspaper were, but they did recognize that ads online...because you search it, you could tag it, you could categorize it...some of the forward thinking people thought, woops, what if all of this just goes online.

AS FAR AS “SHIFTS OVER” ATTITUDE...WHEN DO YOU FEEL YOU STARTED TO SEE THAT CHANGE?

In terms of the Merc News, the early 90s...two things happened that made the dot com boom explode. Remember I said all of this was pre-browser. So, when Netscape launched the web browser and the web came to be, then you had a much more visible product, because of the visual ability to present text in the way that we came to know as the web. So, certainly in the 90s the acceleration happened...a lot papers started to then experiment or create units...But the main criticism of newspapers at that time was that they were very slow. The full recognition of what a threat this would be didn’t really occur. So, it varied from newspaper to newspaper, I would say by the height of the dot com boom, between 2002 and 2006...newspapers were more engaged in it. Knight Ridder was ahead of the
curve for sure, but no longer could newspapers just not know that something was happening.

WHY DO YOU THINK THEY WERE SO SLOW TO RECOGNIZE THIS THREAT?
The book that a lot of people refer to, a case study, called the Innovators Dilemma...not to oversimplify it, but the book is saying, during a time of technological disruption, and this was a huge disruption, even companies that could see that they were being disrupted, the ability to manage that change is by its very nature very difficult. And there are lots of case studies in that book about companies that saw that it was changing but the nature of the disruption is such that even if you know it’s happening, you may not be successful in making that transition or planning for it. So, if we jump forward to 2008, where with the implosion of the economy... if you talk to newspaper historians, there’s always a drop off during a recession, but it always comes back. It always come back less so. But in this last cratering in 2008, it was a perfect storm. So that not only the economy fell apart, and newspapers chief revues in classifieds and retail advertising suffered, but the fact that online now was already removing those products...I mean classified ads, Craigslist and all that, pretty much cratered classified business for newspapers. And newspapers knew it was coming. I mean historically...they did try to create some online products and job listing...I think career builder was one, whatever yahoo had...everyone on the business side said, we have to create the online product equivalents of this to make up for the revenue that’s going away. But everyone kind of assumed it’d be transitional and we’d figure it out, and newspaper would adopt. Then in 2008, perfect storm. Economy tanked, online efficiency had grown so much, that the classified ad market for newspaper had essentially died, Google ads was showing another model that’s essentially a classified model, and all
that migrated away, and the third part, the technology improved so that you could get all of this information online.

**DID YOU THINK AROUND THE TIME PEOPLE STARTED TO RECOGNIZE THE IMPACT OF THE MEDIUM (IN SAN JOSE)...DID YOU ALL HAVE ANY SORT OF LARGER VISION FOR THE ONLINE PRODUCT AND WHAT IT COULD BE, OR MORE OF A “FIGURE IT OUT AS WE GO” APPROACH?**

It was definitely figure it out as we go. I think that whole 1995-2004 period was a time of terribly exciting disruption. And the mantra was, that things were evolving, the technology itself was evolving. The web, remember, had just come up, and every four months or so there was another iteration. And you’d say gee, we couldn’t do this before...one of the things we take for granted now is NCAA basketball brackets for example. I remember in 1995...Netscape continued to improve the browser, and I remember an engineer saying, hey look, you can do tables now on the web. I said, tables? He said yeah we could do something like a basketball bracket, because it was right during March Madness. So we just did it, did our first graphic impressions of a basketball graphic. So between 1995 and 2005, those types of things were going on. It was happening very quickly, anyone who was trying to say, “this is the template, this is the vision,” was generally overrun quickly by change at that time.

**DID YOU FEEL ANYONE IN THE NEWSROOM’S OPINIONS OR IDEAS ON THE INTERNET WERE DISCOUNTED BECAUSE OF THEIR AGE OR STATUS?**

I think what you’re describing it more a question of what occurred in 2005 on. Because by then, there were far more online units within newsrooms, there was clearly the dot com boom going on, so, you were aware of all the different kinds of products, and the different kinds of journalism that was being offered by different sites. And I even remember some studies at that time that said young people are no longer entering the newspaper business
because all of these startups were happening, and they were more exciting, and there was more chances for moving up quickly and going on...I think in the late 1990s...the people who found interest, it was less about age and more about just curiosity and maybe they were more technologically prone, or less intimidated by technology. I think it varied from newsroom to newsroom. I think in some newsrooms you had people who said, I want to move up in the newsroom and it’s gonna take me years to be the city editor because someone else is already there and they have someone else lined up, with all this online stuff happening maybe I can make my mark that way. So it was a variety of things about who ended up doing the online stuff at that time.

Bob Ryan – Interview conducted on May 4, 2011

BIO QUESTION

Well I was a pretty traditional newspaper guy. I came into the business in 1972 or thereabouts. Started as a copy boy and worked my to editor. In 1990 I was probably the deputy managing editor at the San Jose mercury news in SJ, California. And I was working there in that job in 1994, when we had launched a website, one of the first to go online. We actually launched a service in partnership 93, then in 94 we launched a sort of prototype website, and I joined the online division, actually headed up the online division that we created at the Merc. News in early 95. I’d been involve in the development of it in 93 94, then in 95 was asked to lead the new division we created at the Merc. News to begin developing and operating our online news services.

WHY DO YOU FEEL YOUR PAPER WAS SO AHEAD OF THE CURVE?

There were two big reasons. The first was where we were located. San Jose is in the heart
of what’s called Silicon Valley a lot of the high tech innovation and business development that’s occurred in the last 25 30 years had its inception here in this part of California just south of SF. The leadership group at the newspaper in various positions was in very close contact with a lot of people who were in the high tech industry. And then when online networks started to emerge, initially, and this is in the early 90s, initially with proprietary consumer network services, like AOL and prodigy, it began to become clear that electronic services were going to transform in ways nobody really could predict with any certainty, but that they were going to transform the media industry, which at that time consisted of either broadcast TV and radio, printed periodicals. And so the Merc News, just because of our association involved in these emerging technologies around the development of consumer oriented data and info networks, it was a natural thing for us to begin to propose some prototypes. The other reason, and I’d say that’s the biggest reason…the other was the accident of vision, or genius, or whatever. But the editor at the time was a guy named Bob Ingle. He was executive editor and he became extremely interested in the Internet. At that time it was emerging as a consumer medium and he really I think was the driving force at the Merc news and at knight Ridder, the parent company at the Merc news.

EVEN WITH THE PAPER’S FORWARD-THINKING DISPOSITION, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE LEVEL AND NATURE OF THE RESISTANCE TO THE INNOVATION AMONG EMPLOYEES?

I would say they were receptive to the idea, again in large measure because of where they were, we covered Silicon Valley pretty aggressively, it was really the major story of this newspaper. But people can be... they can embrace a concept intellectually, and even emotionally, as long as it doesn’t require them changing the way they do things. And I would say that the Merc Newsroom was no more and no less resistant to the changes that
were ultimately imposed on it by changes in the media world over the last 20 years than most other newspapers around the US. Which is to say they were extremely resistant to making what came to be inevitable changes in everything from work flows to reporting techniques to publishing cycles.

WHEN YOU FIRST STARTED TO PLAN THE LAUNCH...DID YOU HAVE A “VISION” FOR WHAT IT WOULD BE, COMPARED TO THE PRINT PRODUCT, OR WAS IT MORE OF A TRIAL-AND-ERROR PROCESS?

Much more the latter. In terms of vision, what happened was...the initial opportunity to publish electronically all of our editorial content and all of our classified ad content, initially came through AOL, but AOL from a publishers perspective was an extremely limited opportunity. The tools that we had for displaying, packaging, updating content online were extremely limited and all constrained by the tools that AOL had that were available at that time, and by the medium itself, by the way AOL was managed and presented to its consumer audience. It was publishing within a publisher if you will, and there was very little control, and then when WWW first started to appear in 93 or 94 it was readily apparent that the internet and the WWW was going to rapidly eclipse proprietary services like AOL. So what emerged at that time was a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement about having an opportunity through www and http, which was beginning to become a standard at that time publisher could really begin to present content, and deliver it and update it that gave them a tremendous a mount of control again. So we began developing different products and introducing them, but it would be a tremendous amount of exaggeration to say that where was any sort of unified vision. And if we would've had any sort of unified vision, it almost certainly would have been wrong. It was probably just as well that we were trying as many different things as we could and then measuring the
results. To the extent that we were capable of doing that. To see if the audience was responding to it and to see if we were presenting things that looked like they make create an opportunity for us.

HOW MUCH OF AN ISSUE WAS THE NEED FOR PROFITABILITY EARLY IN THE PROCESS? Absolutely none at the beginning. There’s no question that what motivated us was that the Internet presented both a tremendous opportunity and a tremendous threat to the existing business. The ability to publish and distribute content almost without incremental cost was at some level a profound threat to the business model for a newspaper, it didn’t emerge as quickly as we might’ve thought, and it developed in different ways, but the ultimate effect I think bore that out. At the very beginning thought, we had almost no pressure at all to generate revenue. In fact, the experimentation with revenue generating products really followed substantially behind the introduction of our efforts to see if there was a consumer audience that we could begin to build and develop.

AND WHAT ABOUT PRESSURES REGARDING “CANNIBALIZING” THE PRINT PRODUCT? It was a very real factor, and there’s no question that those concerns thwarted a lot of the early debates about how much we should do and how much resources we should devote it. It took, from, I’d say...from early 95...those debates were still going on even 10 years later. I don’t think it was really until 2005 that senior newsroom management people at Knight Ridder newspapers across the country really embraced the idea and the understanding that trying to manage content o protect as much of high value for the print product was a really a mistaken idea. Now many of us who were working more fully in online, that the idea of holding back content so that it could be published first in the newspaper because
that was where most of our readers were and most of our revenue generation was, was ultimately a doomed to fail strategy. So it was very late.

**DID YOU NOTICE ANY DEPARTMENTS IN PARTICULAR THAT WERE MORE OR LESS ACCEPTING OF THE IDEA?**

I’m not sure that there really was. I wondered if for example, business departments, because it was an ongoing narrative in news coverage over the last 15 years, if they would see more immediacy to it. And a greater opportunity to begin changing the way the newspaper did business...but I don’t know that I saw that. Even here in our news dept. at the Merc news. I think it was really more a factor of personalities of the types of people who work at newspapers, that reflected the fact that it was a relatively old and mature business, and that people had refined the process of putting out a newspaper over many decades, and when so much energy is put into refining and making minute adjustments to the operations of a business, change becomes a very, very difficult thing to introduce, until its absolutely essential.

**WHAT ABOUT DIFFERENT STATUS LEVEL OR AGE, WERE CERTAIN PEOPLE MORE EXCITED, OR CERTIN PEOPLE’S IDEAS DISCOUNTED?**

I think early on that was not so much the case, but I think around 2000 and certainly increasing through the decade, we began to see increasing numbers of young people who were coming into the business who were, amazed if you will, at how resistant others were to things they had grown up with and were conversant with. So if somebody had been going to school in the late 90s, or early 2000s even, they had grown up with computer, with email, with the world wide web, and for them to be exposed to folks who were, say journalists who were are still struggling with email, and still struggling to communicate that way...it was a bit of a culture shock.
AND HOW LONG WERE YOU THE HEAD OF THAT ONLINE UNIT?

I stayed until...in the beginning of 99 although I was still at the Merc News and was until the end of 99...Knight Ridder had, in the intervening years, had done a number of things, including moving there headquarters from Miami to SJ. And they did that in significant measure because of what was happening in the technology sector. And in preparation for moving to SJ, which I think occurred in 01, but in preparation for that KR began to discuss consolidating its online operations, which had been launched in all of their markets, I think we had 32 separate newspapers around the US. So at that time, KR began to discuss consolidating all of its Internet operations, so that many of the functions, while they would continue like the papers to serve local markets, many of the functions that could be centralized would be, and they’d be managed through a single organization. And those discussions led to KR actually created a new operating company which at that time was knight Ridder dot com, which consolidated all of the Internet operations for 32 markets into one company. I became the VP and GM of the Internet operation for all of KR. I continued in that role, there were a variety of changes during that time. There were 2 CEOs successively that developed the company from 2000 to 06. But KR.com and then eventually KR Digital, we became the operating company for all of the Internet operations for KR, and developed a single digital platform on which all of the sites were published, and developed a variety of operating procedures really rationalize the online business and make it profitable.

AND DURING THAT TIME PERIOD FROM 92-93, TO THE TIME WHEN YOU HEADED THAT ONLINE TEAM ALL THE WAY TO 2005-06, OTHER THAN THE RESISTANCE TO WORKFLOW CHANGE, WHAT KIND OF CHANGES DO YOU THINK IN PEOPLE’S ATTITUDES? DO YOU THINK THERE WAS A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN THE BUSINESS AT THAT LATER TIME THAT STILL PERICIEVED THE INTERNET IN A BEGRUDGING WAY?
Sure. There are plenty of people that do. And they range from reporters all the way up to newspaper executives. The fact is, the newspapers industry was a great one to be in even in the early 1990s, it was as close to a pure monopoly as you could get. We were able to generate enormous profits, and didn't really have much in the way of competition. We liked to think we had competition from things like AdCo, and things that peel off little pieces of the local ad dollars, but when you took it all in, all that was spend on advertising, the majority of it was spend at the local newspaper and the Internet fundamentally changed that. And it changed it in two big ways. One, it created the opportunity for companies like Google, and Yahoo to begin delivering local advertisers messages to the people they wanted to reach, to their audience. And do it much more effectively and much more cost efficiently than a newspaper was organized and setup to do. That was huge. And then the other thing it did was, it created the opportunity for good or for will, for people to stay connected to sources of news and info, if not 24/7, at least most of the day. And that process has only accelerated with the developments of smart phones, and tablets, that have enabled people not only to read a newspaper anywhere they are anytime they want to read it, but for the news to be immediate. Constantly updated. And it’s that transformation, the instant delivery of news that has completely transformed the way newspapers and newsrooms in particular...collections of reporters and editors...the way they operate. The knowledge that the deadline is constant, rather than there being a 24 news cycle, which was firmly baked in the early 1990s, there was a measure and pace to the way reporters and editors would organize their days. And now, there’s still a fervent desire among folks who have been in the biz more than 10 or 15 years, to get back to the way it used to be when it was a more
predictable pace, and the need to constantly deliver finished news products was not as constant as it is today.

Pat Sullivan – Interview conducted April 27, 2011

BIO QUESTION

In 1990 I was working at the Missoulian Newspaper in Missoula, Montana. And in 92 I got a Knight Fellowship at Stanford. So I went out to Stanford, and discovered the World Wide Web, basically. I had been kind of fooling around with the Internet before that on BBS’s, and things like Compuserve message boards and things like that. But, when I got to Stanford I learned about this whole new idea, “the invention of the web.” And as soon as I saw it, I knew journalism was going to change. Because it married words and photos and graphics, things like that. So, after my fellowship year in Stanford, went back to Montana with the idea that we should build a webpage, so we did. We were one of the 1st 100 American newspapers to go online. This tiny little 30,000-circulation newspaper in a tiny town in Montana. And I decided just sort of out of the blue that this is the future, and that I shouldn’t be sitting in Montana writing whatever I was writing at the time about right-wing nuts, that I should be getting onto this new thing called the web. So with this blind confidence I was going to be in the future of journalism. So I quit my job in Missoula, and started freelancing for Lycos, which was an early web engine. There was a small group of us scattered around the country, and we wrote, and this is very unusual, but we wrote website descriptions for the search engine Lycos, by hand. It was so unusual that NPR did an interview with me about it. So anyways, I did that for 6 months and then the San Jose Mercury News came calling. And they hired me to go out to San Jose and write what we
called “an online column with attitude.” And it was called Good Morning Silicon Valley. Which is still going on by the way. And it was a daily tech roundup, of news from all over the web about technology news, because San Jose I right in the middle of Silicon Valley...and we were shocked by how popular it was. Within a couple of months, we had 50,000 email subscribers, so I would put it up on the web and then send it out in an email, and it became an extremely popular feature, and this was pre-blogging, it was essentially a blog in that it was aggregating content from around the web and written with attitude, although we didn’t have the technology to let people comment directly on the blog. I would often take their email comments and put them in the blog itself and kind of respond to it that’s way.

HOW WAS THE IDEA FOR THE ONLINE PRODUCT RECEIVED IN MISSOULA?
It was still received pretty well, except at small newspapers, always a question of resources. And I was one of the better-paid, more senior reporters there. And when I said I wanted to do, you know, half of the time web stuff, and half time reporting, the paper couldn’t really afford to let one of there local reporters, which at the time all we had were local reporters, stop writing half time to do this thing that had no revenue coming in. this was pre advertising really. And so the paper said, you can build it, and you can update kind of on your own time. But we don’t want you devoting 20 hours a week or whatever it was to that. So I was pretty disheartened by that.

SO IT WAS PRIMARILY A CONFLICT ABOUT RESOURCES, AND NOT...
No it was over resources, because I had pitched it, and people tended to agree, that for a small local paper in the West, it’s not so much that people locally are going to be using it, rather, it’s kind of the Montana diaspora was going to be able to read stories from Missoula.
Missoula is the home of University of Montana, you know, and a lot of people who went there want to keep up with the news there. And so it was really seen as expanding our readership. But it was a matter of do you want someone to do this, or do you want someone to cover City Hall? Or cover courts, or do you want to do this.

AND YOU BASICALLY LAUNCHED THE ONLINE EDITION BY YOURSELF?

Well there were two of us that knew how to do it, and we taught it to ourselves online. A guy named Dave Knadler, we kind of collaborated. He was an editor, and I was a reporter, and so the two of us would sit down at night at his house or my house, and figure out how to do it, and then we’d design a page and figure it out, and then put it up, and then every night or every other night one of the other one of us would just put news stories up. We weren’t putting the whole paper up, because this was very much a hand coding operation. We both taught ourselves HTML, and HTML 1.0 I might point out.

DID YOU HAVE ANY SORT OF VISION OF WHAT ELSE YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO DO BESIDES PUT STORIES UP (ADDED VALUE CONTENT)?

No at that point it was finally the world is going to see the great work that we at the Missoulian do here. Other people rather than those in Western Montana. This way, people all over the world can see our work that was our attitude at the time; that was the worth of it.

ANY DEPARTMENTS WITHIN THE PAPER THAT WERE NOTICEABLY MORE OR LESS SUPPORTIVE OF THE IDEA?

I don’t remember that at all. I don’t remember getting any push back other than the fact that it was tough for us to get the time to do it. When you went to someone and said, I’m going to put this up tonight, it was a pretty receptive response. Don’t remember many people objecting to it, in terms of...in any terms actually. People thought it was a good idea,
the only question was, how are we going to make money of it, and we didn’t have any answer for that, we’re newsroom people. And we weren’t really putting things up before we went to the paper, so it wasn’t a matter of cannibalizing, which is word that became popular later. “Cannibalizing our print product.”

**WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IN A RURAL AREA LIKE THAT YOU DIDN’T EXPERIENCE THE PUSHBACK THAT MAYBE YOU WOULD EXPECT?**

Well, I think that first of all it’s a pretty well educated area, also, there weren’t a lot of people online at the time. This would’ve been …93 when we did this. So there weren’t a lot of people locally and around the country that were online. We’d read stories about this “web” but we hadn’t seen it. We had little demonstrations at the paper, to show people what was there, and they were interested in what this was.

**AND WHY DO YOU FEEL THAT THINGS WORKED SO WELL IN SJ, ONCE YOU WERE THERE?**

Well, San Jose was already a “leader” for news online. They had partnered with AOL a couple of years before, so it was on AOL’s service, and also had its own stand alone website. In the first year or so I was there, there was some tension between what we give to AOL and what we put on our own website. And then the paper eventually ended its contract with AOL, and just put all of its money in the basket of the Web. I think it took off because it was technology, and the early adaptors are always interesting in technology. It was Silicon Valley, and that says a lot about technology. And the fact that it written, sort of with a personal attitude. We had bandied back and forth about how I should write this, and my boss would say write it like talk radio. Except, I never listened to talk radio. So I didn’t really know what that was, but, I wrote it like I would write a letter to a friend. Kind of, making stupid little jokes. Showing a little bit of personality. I remember once a made a
comment that I had just flown in the night before from Chicago and the landing was pretty scary, and I got an email from a guy who had been on the same flight and was just, amazed. That was this connection. I once quoted some Bob Dylan lyric, I think it was Bob Dylan but just some rock and roll lyric, and some guy wrote me saying something like, “I can't believe you quoted that Bob Dylan lyric, will you marry me!” So, it was just fun, people just responded really well to that sort of insertion of personality into links.

SO YOU MENTIONED YOUR INITIAL INTEREST IN THE MEDIUM AT STANFORD WAS SPARKED BY THE USERS ABILITY TO COMBINE TEXT WITH PHOTOS, ETC., BUT DID YOU FORESEE THIS “PERSONAL CONNECTION” ASPECT OF IT?

I didn’t expect the personal connection as much as I got. I had fooled around with technology in pre-web days; I knew the power of it. And I saw when visuals were finally connected with text, I thought, oh this is journalism or this could be journalism. And I could see that there would be abilities that we didn't have back then in journalism, to you know, pull in all kinds of data, and connect people to sources that we would just write about in the past. You know rather than just writing a report about a government agency, we could actually show people what the report said. So that all got me very, very excited.

AND DID THE SAME CONFLICTS/LIMITATIONS OVER RESOURCES THAT OCCURRED IN MONTANA OCCUR IN SAN JOSE?

No not so much there. You know, the Merc, when I was there, was booming. It was a great paper, I don't know what the circulation was, but was 600 or 700 thousand, and, it was a full newsroom. S that resource issue was not an issue at all, at least not that I encountered. And I was there a good solid 4 years, getting up early, and showing up to work at 530 to do this column, because we thought it was important that we have it in the east coasters mailboxes by noon. So that meant I had to post it by 8 o'clock or 830 San Jose time.
AND YOU HEADED TO DC FROM SAN JOSE?

Yeah.

IN 2000?

End of 99, yeah, I was just kind of restless after doing the same thing, and the boom was on, so I was recruited to go to this tech startup called the Industry Standard in San Francisco. And, it was a Tech magazine, a business tech magazine, and they wanted to basically go there and be the editorial leader of their website. So I moved to SF, worked for this hot new startup, and it was a hot news startup, and then when the bust happened, we lost all of our advertisers, declared bankruptcy and closed. And that’s when I came to the Washington Post.

STILL SOME LEVEL OF RESISTANCE, OR PERCEIVING MEDIUM AS THREATENING IN DC, OR MOSTLY EVERYONE HAD COME AROUND?

DC was really different. Because I was so absorbed in the Internet, and in the possibilities, and everybody on the West Coast knew all about it, and had signed on. And it was a real shock to come to DC, and find that they’re still fighting battles from 5 years ago. So there was, when I got here, the resistance, in some corners of the media, surprised media including my own newspaper, to even put stories up on the web, and that was a real shocker to me. Because this issue in my world, had been settled for years. And I was working on the print side, and I...emailed Post online guy, and he didn’t have a job for me, but he directed me to the print guy, and I was hired there. So I was hired as the local tech editor, and I was surprised by the resistance I encountered in the print newsroom to the web. Which at that time was a separate company located in another location, across the Potomac River, in another city even. That has dissipated over the years, and now we’re all
one newsroom, and one company organization, and also about half the place has been bought out since I got here.

AND DO YOU CHALK THAT UP TO JUST GEOGRAPHY?

I think it’s geography, and openness to new technology and new ways of business. Part of it was times had changed to, and people were very serious about how is the web going to support the journalism that we care so much about. So the serious of the lack of financial underpinnings had accelerated. In 96, you could say it’ll all work out, advertising will come around. And in 01, that was...it was coming around, but it wasn’t coming around very fast. And a real question had arisen about whether or not advertising would support the size and quality of newsrooms that we were used to.

SO THE CONCERN OF THE DAY AT THE TIME WAS WHETHER OR THE PRODUCT WOULD TURN A PROFIT, NOT HOW IT WOULD SERVE READERS OR IMPROVE THE BRAND?

In my view, that was the root cause. There’s always little skirmishes over news judgment, or should the print product...I think if there would’ve been a lot of money flowing in from the website, those other things would’ve been smaller issues.

Gina Setser – Interview conducted on May 18, 2011

BIO QUESTION

Well in the early 90s I was working at the University of Missouri...I was the assistant director of publications there. And I’m trying to remember at what point they decided to give us these sort of “dumb computers”... It was a PC based system, and they installed it like it was installed to one big CPU that was the size of like a refrigerator. And to my surprise, my boss made me the system administrator. Because they decided that someone who was a
manager needed to be system admin. Nobody knew anything about them; the whole thing was really pretty ludicrous. So, they had like the manuals for this computer stretched from one end of the CPU to another. Like you could lay the fridge on its side, and it was a little longer or taller than that.

AND YOU HAVE NO IT TRAINING AT THIS POINT?

Oh, no. None at all. It was just, hey, my boss was probably a few years away from retiring, and he said, hey I don't want to do this, you're doing it. What could I say, he was my boss. SO I become the system admin. And there was a person that we could call that would come in and work on the operating system. And the truth is the thing didn't need that much, and I wasn't about to read those manuals. But I decided at one point...they had this kind of a training session on the campus that sounded like it might apply. And I thought, well maybe I can go to this thing and sort of figure out what it is I'm supposed to do. So, I signed up, I went, and it was kind of a life changing class. Because it had nothing to do with administrating PC systems, but it had everything to do with the Internet, and how the nuclear physicists and the people on campus from other disciplines were using this thing called the Internet to communicate with their colleagues in Israel. And I had had sort of a nodding acquaintance with a sort of telephony kind of system when I had worked for the division of extension. They used the Internet to communicate with their field agents. But I more or less thought of that as a telephone system, but I later realized that it was actually a telephone system that was built on the Internet. But up until I sat in that room listening to these people talk about this thing called the Internet. I really knew nothing about it, and about the Net per se, and I was just kind of blown away by the potential. As someone from the non-academic world, but a media world, stepping into that, and seeing kind of an “oh
shit!” moment…. like this thing, whatever it is, is going to upend what I do for a living. And it took a lot of years before that actually happened. But that day, I knew that it was going to be huge. And the people in the room were talking about something altogether different than where my mind went with it. But I realized right then that I kind of needed to get a grip on what was going on with computers and...basically what could happen with these networks, and what we could do with it. So I was in a little publication unit, and we put out all of the publications for the 19 schools and colleges at Mizzou. And we actually started using some of the interconnectedness in the news system they installed to setup databases, to put out things like the phone directory, the course catalog, and then some of the publications actually had a guy who would traipse with me to these various little training sessions on things like HTML. I remember sitting in a room, and these people talking about things called “pixels” on screens. And of course at that time, we were of course working with rapid graphs at that time, you know just drawing layouts by hand with ink pens. And, Jack and I, the guy who I would drag with me to these things, I’d say to him we’ve got to know something about this. So, it was an adventure then. But we did make some good use of it, we did actually learn to use...Jack was using BB at it. Because we found a program that could talk to the modem, and we would transmit this little tabloid that we did every week to the printer, over the modem, and we just thought it was the coolest thing. We also had it setup to layout the whole tablet by itself, and we were very excited about that because it was one less thing we had to do by hand. And it was fairly routine kind of project. So that was my early experience with the Internet. I was at Mizzou about 12 years. I went to school there. I worked in that publications office for about 6 years, before that I had worked in the office of extension. I started out as a photojournalist documentary
photog, and transitioned into graphic design while I was doing all of this. Like I said, in truth, the division of extension was probably one of the first groups that routinely put that in the scientists...they had a more systematic approach to using some of the technology to communicate with agents around the state who were out in the field, and actually, I think farmers were probably early adopters which I don’t think people realize. Because they would have some of these telephone devices in their homes, the people who were farming, and they would use it to communicate and ask questions to the extension division when they had crop problems, or any kind of issue they needed to resolve. They could just call up this system, and call up all kinds of information.

AND YOU WENT BACK TO THE MEDIA WORLD AFTER MIZZOU?

I did, I got a masters degree, and I decided it was time for a change for me. Plus I was inundated with all these classes on how the newspaper business was kind of in a state of change, and I had no idea how tradition bound they actually were, but I thought they were kind of on the cusp of a huge transition into, first of all, pagination systems, newspapers were actually adopting those, but slowly, very slowly. And I saw this whole thing with the Internet coming, being something that was going to have a big impact, and I thought that it would be a whole lot of fun to be a part of that. So when I got into newspaper, boy was I rudely awakened by just how, I would have to say moribund that industry was then. And just how unwilling to pick up anything new or change or develop some of these new technologies. This was at the Albuquerque Tribune. And in some ways we were ahead of the game. I actually worked for a guy who was pretty far sighted. The editor was a young guy, younger than I was, and the managing editor, and he was very far sighted. He was the one really kind of gave us the go ahead, and could see that when the BBSs were a part of
our world, that maybe this was something that we needed to try out. He setup thing like a stock call in line, where people could call in to the paper for stock quotes. And actually that was really ahead of its time. And he was very instrumental when I suggested that we could put out this BBS system and put out a lot of the stories that weren’t getting into the newspaper, onto that, and have it be a subscription service, he was very instrumental in letting us do that. And encouraging us along that and helping with the planning, and like I said, he was pretty tuned in. So I think we weren’t necessarily the first paper to have a digital system in place, but we were certainly among the very first that did that sort of thing. The little BBS system that we set up, we called it E-Trib, and it was subscription only. When a new editor came in, the new editor that they hired was really nice and he did some good thing, but he was certainly not the kind that had the vision that Tim and Jack had. HE immediately shut down the BBS, and as I recall he said, “this internet thing isn’t going anywhere.” Believe it or not, we were in the black at the time, we were actually making money on our little BBS.

YOU SAID YOU FOUND THE GENERAL ATTITUDE TO BE UNRECEPTIVE, BUT THAT YOU HAD SOME FORWARD THINKING BOSSES. WAS THE UNCEPTIVE VIBE AT THE PAPER IN GENERAL, OR...

Well that paper was owned by EW Scripps. So in order to do much, that’s where your funding came from. And you know we were in a little more complicated situation than a lot of other papers, because we were in a joint operating agreement with the other competing newspaper in the city. And just from an economic and advertising standpoint, that really locked us down in ways that maybe other papers wouldn’t have been. So there was only so much we could do without needing some sort of funding and backing from the corporate office. And that’s where we really hit the wall. Most of the time. What I experienced both
with the BBS and later when we moved on to the Web, and actually started up a website, there was an interim where we had nothing...and later on after HTML came along, I sat around for a few weekends and taught myself HTML and then basically designed a website for the paper. And they let me play at it. The editor that shut down the BBS allowed me to kind of tinker with the website in my “off time,” mostly on my time. And then my real job the rest of the time. I was the news editor. And then I was some kind of roving editor when I really started working on the website. But when we started the BBS I was the news editor.

AND WHEN IT CAME TIME TO PUSH THIS IDEA AND GET PEOPLE IN THE NEWSROOM TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE SITE THAT YOU HAD CREATED...HOW WAS IT RECEIVED? DID YOU FIND THAT MANY OTHERS HAD THE SAME “OH S!” MOMENT THAT YOU HAD?

No not really. I think that they were highly suspect of the whole thing. I think that that because we had had some success with the BBS thing, the people there were just a little more enlightened in some way. And it was a small paper, so you know, nothing anybody ever did went totally unnoticed. In a bigger place like where I am now, if somebody had been tinkering with something like this, three-quarters of the people there would've even had any knowledge of it going on. But at the Tribune, when it was going on, everyone knew that we had had the BBS, how it kind of worked, and that it had been reasonably successful. There was one person, not me, who was assigned to it. His name was Dave Carlson. He was a pioneer for developing that BBS when we put it into play. But at any rate...There wasn't a lot of excitement, I think that more than anything, it was...people worked very hard at a small paper, and they don't have a lot of time to mess with that sort of thing. And, I don’t think anybody, except for maybe me and a couple others, were excited about this and thinking it was going to go anywhere. Most people were thinking, you know, I don’t want to waste my time with that. I think they got a little more into it when AOL came along and I
got an account for us on AOL...and we had one computer hooked up to AOL in the newsroom. And people could go sit down and just sort of play with it really. Look up stuff. But I think even then, except for the people that I used to drag over and say, look at this! Isn't this neat! They would pretty much ignore it.

AS FAR AS THE IDEA OF CANNIBALIZING, HOW BIG OF A DEAL WAS THE ISSUE OF TAKING THINGS FROM THE PRINT PRODUCT AND PUTTING THEM ONLINE WHERE THEY COULD BE FOUND FOR FREE?

Early on, when we were doing that with the BBS, and this was before people got their backs up about publishing things before they went into the paper, I don’t think anyone was even that aware...except for maybe the editor...because we were mainly focused on getting things up there that we couldn’t get into the paper. And, we actually were developing a community around it. So we had people that were sharing recipes on it...that was one of the most popular things on the BBS, was food and books. Which, is quite a contrast actually on the Web, because those type of things don’t go particularly well on the web today...but actually I’ve always kind of thought that it has a lot to do with how we at newspapers approach these things, because when it was a BBS, we had subscribers, and they were committed. And we’d have a big party for them once a year, they’d come in, meet each other face to face. And it was early education for a lot of us as far as how nasty people could get, even when you know who they are. When they’re online. But I would say that overall, people in the newsroom just kind of, accepted it, there wasn’t too much resistance when we put stuff up there because we really weren’t trying to beat ourselves on any stories, by putting them out there online. At that point. Later on when we had a website, then that discussion really, really came up. And that was a struggle. Because as I said that particular editor wasn’t a fan of the Internet to begin with. And to him, the idea of putting a story up
before it ran in the paper was just not going to happen. Eventually we did start doing some of that, but only after a lot of lobbying on my part.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE ISSUE OF DIVERTING MANPOWER TO THE PROJECT?

This was an odd twist. One of the people who had transferred into online journalism...a guy who had at one point worked for me as a copy editor, went to the Rock Mountain News, and got involved...his name is Bob Benn, he eventually became a VP at Scripps. And fought the good fight as long as he could there. Bob ended up being kind of the head of a unit at corporate where...say there was...one person at each newspaper, like me, who started a little website there, and we would all collaborate online, just about daily, and Bob was the linchpin, and he had a small team of people who were very savvy Internet folks, that we would go to for help on occasion. They did a lot of the groundwork for getting us servers. And technically, at one stretch of that, we all worked directly for Bob. And that happened because he knew that a lot of these editors at these small papers were not going to support what we did. So at that point, the corporate parent was actually the one that was helping us out and helping grow. And the editors were actually the stumbling blocks.

WITHIN THE NEWSROOM, WERE PEOPLE WHO WERE YOUNGER OR HAD LESS STATUS...DO YOU FEEL THEIR IDEAS REGARDING THE PROJECT WERE DISCOUNTED?

You know, interesting thing there, I would've been considered older when I went into newspapers because I had a career working at Mizzou. So I was a 40 something, and I was the one initiating these things. The people in the other newspapers that I communicated with at other papers online, they were very often younger than I was. But the interesting thing in the newsroom itself, and I know that the prevailing wisdom is that the younger people would embrace this, but the truth was a little bit different. I would say that sometimes it was the older journalists, or rather the middle-aged journalists who were
intrigued by it. Sometimes the younger journalists, and sometimes the interns, now they would come in and they would be more knowledgeable and you know excited, but their view was sort of, yeah well, what next? This was not as new to them...so they didn’t realize what a wall there was that they would have to bat their heads against. And the young hires that we had were so busy trying to build their careers, and do truly great journalism because they all saw that paper as a stepping stone, so they were out trying to do some of the best work of their career, and I think it was more or less on the periphery for them. So really it was kind of those mid career people who would step in and learn a little bit more about it.

AND WHEN THE SITE LAUNCHED, DID YOU FEEL THERE WAS ANY SORT OF GRAND VISION AS TO WHAT IT WOULD BE IN RELATION TO THE PRINT PRODUCT? OR WHAT EXACTLY YOU WANTED OUT OF THAT PRODUCT?

That’s an interesting question. I definitely had a vision of what it could be. And I don’t think I had any idea about it supplanting the print product at any time. I kind of saw it as a way to further engage readers in the news product itself. And as a way to build a community around different topical areas, whether it was sports, and sports was always like a made for the web topical area. And that proved to be the case their very early on. But I think I saw it more as a community-building thing. And as a way to reach out to readers, and give them things we couldn’t give them in the newspaper, more of an extension than a replacement. Something that was totally different. And that’s just how I saw it. I think that there were people above me who were a little threatened. Not too threatened, not enough to do anything about it. But just saw it as an expense.

DO YOU KNOW IF ANY OF YOUR COLLEAGUES WERE CONSULTING ANY SORT OF LITERATURE ON HOW TO HANDLE THIS PROCESS, OR MORE OF A “WE’LL JUST SEE HOW THIS GOES?”
I think it was definitely the see how this goes. I don't think newspapers at that point, not from where I sat, were thinking in terms of any kind of research and development. Now, those of us who were online used to talk about it a lot. And about how what we wished would happen, we wished we could get some funds for say, developing something, for instance I remember when Monster.com kind of started rearing its head and then later on Craigslist, and I was in the position to know at that time that 40% of our profit at least was coming from classified ads and I saw that as a huge threat to our revenue stream. And I think that several of us saw that as a very real threat. Unfortunately, we were the ones working on the web site, not the ones in a position to spend any money to get an auction site or a classified site up. And when I tried to get a classified site in place, or get that kind of thing attached to our website, it was not something I could do there at all. And I knew at that point, or at least thought, you know, my god these papers are really in trouble.

AND YOU MENTIONED THAT THE BBS SYSTEM HAD BEEN FAIRLY PROFITABLE, SO IT SEEMS THERE WAS ALREADY KNOWLEDGE THAT YOU COULD MAKE MONEY OFF THESE THINGS, AND THAT IS WAS SOMETHING YOUR CUSTOMER BASE WAS INTERESTED IN...

You would've thought, right? It certainly made me think there was something there. But my editor, no. He would say, there's nothing to this, this whole thing is going to go away, there's no point in putting any kind of effort into that. And I kept trying to point out, you know, it's like paying for itself, and the people love it. And when he shut it down, there was this huge outcry from the people who were subscribers. Granted, they weren't going to pay the bill for the newspaper overall, but they loved it. They loved that thing. And they really were upset when the paper shut it down.

AND ARE YOU STILL WORKING IN NEWSPAPERS NOW?

Yes I work for the AJC on AJC.com.
SO YOU’VE OBVIOUSLY SEEN A BIG CHANGE IN THE WAY THE MEDIUM IS APPROACHED, RATHER BY FORCE OR BY CHOICE...SO HOW DO YOU THINK THAT SITUATION IF BEING FORCED INTO IT HAS CHANGED THE WAY WE GOT TO WHERE WE ARE NOW?

You know, I think, and I’m only one person, that right now there’s not really an excitement, it’s still really kind of a how do we do this? How do we turn this into something that makes money for us so that we don’t lose everything? And that’s really where it is. They’re walking a tight rope at this point. It’s, how do we keep the print revenues high enough, long enough, to take the digital products, and that’s plural at this point obviously because mobile is coming in, the iPad is coming in and really stepping in there too, so there are other platforms moving into our field of view, and I think that from what the senior management, from what they’re saying to us, is, they basically are saying we’ve got a to make enough money from the print side to support the news gathering operation until such time that we can figure out how to make more money from the digital side of things. And it sounds to me like they’re more convinced that, and of course they’ll never make the kind of profits they were before, and it’s going to be a much more scaled down operation than newspapers have even been in the past. But they don’t believe that it will ever be, or has any chance of making the kind of money that they made at these companies before. They’re just trying to make it a profitable enterprise. And I don’t see them, from where I sit, trying a lot of truly innovative things. I mean I spend a good part of my days putting up content for the iPad, but not in what I would consider to be an innovative way. To me, it’s just one more version on shovelware. And if anyone had the means to try something like that, it would be Cox, because they have the means, they’re pretty diversified financially, and that’s probably the only reason the newspaper still exists. I mean we’ve had lots of rounds of layoffs, and buyouts, and that sort of thing, so when I came here 10 years ago, the staff was better than
twice the size it is now. So it's considerably shrunk, we're in a smaller space, all on one floor including the digital people.

AND HOW IS THE DIGITAL CONTENT HANDLED, AS FAR AS UPLOADING, ETC. WHAT IS THE PROCESS?

Actually, we're kind of in an odd place right now. We just got a new editor. There was this phase where the previous editor said, it was all digital first. And, they reorganized the whole newsroom around digital. And then they re-reorganized it back a couple years ago around print. So it's very confusing what they're actually trying to do. Right now the new editor, he's worked with TV too, and he worked at a level where he's worked with a couple different papers, and worked with them on integrating their radio/TV properties and that seems to be what he's doing here, more integrating. In fact, we just found out a week ago that a good part of our breaking news part of the digital team, will be moving to the TV station and working out of there. Because we do have reporters assigned to the online, and we're all one newsroom, even though the digital is kind of separating out, we work very close with our colleagues, and if you were to look at our site you will see we have a lot of blogs and these are done with print reporters, much of the blogging is done by people who write both online and in print. So, there have been huge strides, because when I came I was part of a very tiny team of about 6 people, we were called the innovation team. The only time in my career there's actually been a team like that. And that's one of the reasons I came here. But at any rate, now there's 30 to 40 people assigned specifically to digital. And in advertising, there's a whole marketing team around digital. I do know that they make millions with the advertising on the digital product, that our website is sold out through the year, and we're actually moving into the black as an organization. A lot of companies didn't try to embrace this at all. It all comes down to the money. When you think about a 30 or 40
percent profit margin, that’s more than just about any business in existence. And that’s the kind of money they were making, at the same time they were crying poverty to their employees, and no we cant give you raises, but at any rate they were making these profits, and when I tried to get ad people engaged...and that really is the key...you've got to have your money makers, your rain makers, out there working on your side, and the fact is, they could make thousands of dollars by selling one big box ad for the print product, and pennies for selling something for the website. And this is when we actually had advertising on the website. So, there was a considerable amount of short sidedness on the marketing and advertising side that really, really were stumbling blocks. I mean you cant argue with that, how do you tell someone, no I want you to concentrate on making 500 dollars instead of 20,000?

John Murrell – interview conducted on May 24, 2011

BIO QUESTION

I came to the Mercury News from another KR paper, the St Louis News Tribune, came out here in 86. And I think it would've been around 91 when...well first off, KR as a corporation had long aware of the coming potential of electronic news delivery. And they had the videotext experiment that they put a lot of money into that. It was run out of Miami in the 80s. But of course it was one of those wrong time and public not ready yet deals...where the system required that you buy a specialized deck or keyboard or something like that and attach it to your TV and all that sort of stuff. So, after putting a lot of effort into that, and it folding, KR was probably a little bit gun-shy about jumping back in. At the Merc News we had an exec editor named Bob Ingle, and he was kind of one the driving forces within KR
urging them or telling them we’ve got to give this another shot. And his idea was for the Merc News to serve as the electronic news test ground for KR. So in the fall of 91, Ingle pulled together a group of representative from around the Merc News, plus some outside folks, and we went off for a weekend of brainstorming at a conference center in Carmel. And started talking about what Ingle wanted to refer to as Mercury Center. And his vision of Merc Center was an electronic extension of the printed-paper, bringing the contents of the paper PLUS, and it had two components, one was an online component, and one was a phone based component. Because one of the things Ingle was concerned about especially in those days, was the technology gap. He didn’t want to leave out people that hadn’t gotten computerized yet. So the brainstorming session was about everything from the mechanics, to the subject areas where the most opportunities would be for not only for audience response but also for additional information. It was already pretty clear which were the ripest areas. It was going to be stat heavy news like business, sports, and entertainment. Stat heavy and passionate audience. And so the thing started to take shape there. The initial big decision was: big your own system or sign with an existing online system. And at that time you were looking at CompuServe, Prodigy…but AOL was sort of a fledgling entry, and the first with a semi-decent workable graphic interface. So, either hook up with them, or, build your own sort of bulletin board system. And that’s what some papers had been doing before then, setting up kind of elementary bulletin board systems and putting up some additional content…and I think around 91 or 92, I think it was the Chicago Tribune that hooked up with AOL and started putting some portion of their content up there everyday. So the decision was made to hook up with AOL which at the time had like 250,000 subscribes across the US. So over the next year and a half or so, the planning went on. The
Merc News and Ingle created a small team of 6 or 7 core folks to develop our end of things. And from the software side of things, our systems guys did the work of building our own editorial and publishing system that would get content from the editorial system into a system accessible to PC’s then it was coded in a way that AOL could receive it and present it. So, there was a whole lot of system design work that went into it. Also the navigational structure and all that stuff. So, the thing launched, Merc Center launched. Ingle and I, in May of 93...Initially it was subscription based, an extra 4.95 a month or something. And AOL members would get like a specialized disk. So it was really was kind of remarkable, we were the first paper in the world to have it’s full content online, every day, including classified ads. We had a couple dozen topic related forums, we had seven nights a week programs that were sort of evening entertainment in chat rooms. We had file download areas, and posted hundreds of supplemental stories that couldn’t make it into the print paper. And one of the things to sort of connect the readership of the print paper to the resources that were available online was to use number that would appear at the end of the story in the printed paper, and then if you went on the Merc Center, you could enter those as AOL keywords to get the full text of the stories. You could also do this on the phone system, but it fell behind the online stuff because we wanted to get the online stuff up first. But you could call in and sort of do the same thing as a web chat now. So we started on AOL in 93, and around 94, the web browser and Netscape became obvious that that was where things were going to do, so we started working on translating what we had done on AOL into a web publication. And I think it might have been late in 94 that we launched the web version of Merc Center, and for the next year or two, we were publishing both on AOL and
on the web. And I think after our 3rd year of AOL, that’s when we dropped them and were solely on the web at that point.

YOU MENTIONED AT THE BRAINSTORMING MEETING THAT YOU IDENTIFIED THAT STAT HEAVY STUFF WAS GOING TO WORK WELL ONLINE…HOW DID YOU COME TO THAT CONCLUSION?

Well what you had in the room was a bunch of people who had spent their careers in journalism. So they already had a good idea with what type of content was driven by what sort of interest, and you combine that with the aspects of the electronic medium like searchability, and you look for these places where those capabilities match up. Like people following stocks and sports team.

Dick Van Helsema – interview conducted on May 17, 2011

BIO QUESTION

I was a photojournalism major, college photography. Worked at a geography magazine for a short period of time, about a year, and then came back to the newspaper industry, and then was working as a photographer. But over time, an editor in the newsroom in Florida, and then San Diego, and then Charlotte. During that time, I started dealing with more technological thing even in the late 80s, either having to deal with photography production, and publishing, things like that. By the time we got to the early 90s, which was a dozen year after I graduated, I was running the news and publishing system for the Charlotte Observer. Under that sort general umbrella, we had been experiencing with some pre Internet type things, like dial up, bulletin boards, audio text, interactive voice response things, all kinds, just playing around because they were percolating out there. And there were people that worked for me, that we found in the newspapers that were interested in experimenting
with those things. One of the guys who worked for me had previous worked in Anchorage Alaska and had started the Anchorage first Macintosh kind of dial in for newspapers. And he was playing around with a BBS multimodem dial in system for people to come in and exchange messages but it was only to the small community of listeners to the dial in system. We had audio text make some money, and things like that. It was that BBS system that we actually connected the Internet to for the fist time. And that was in 1992. That was only to make that BBS, which was really just essentially a multimodem bank of field style, like Prodigy or something. But, people started asking us to enable them to use the Internet on email. And at that time, even email was just driven by a pinned interface and a bbs system or command line kind of environment. And what we’d do is let them send email to their bulletin board accounts, and then overnight, we’d connect to what was just the Internet with no browser, we would exchange the emails with people with addresses all over the world. And then when people would come back the next day, they’d experience this fantastic thing of exchanging mail overnight with people all over the world. So, that was the actual first time we used the Internet in Charlotte. Another KR paper, with the Merc Center on AOL at that time that was sort of the featured newspaper online in an Internet environment. Although at that time it was an AOL environment not a wide-open type thing. Another KR person, C Jennewein, he actually started the same type of Merc News/AOL relationship before he worked for KR. When he worked in Atlanta, and he connected the AJC with what was called then the Prodigy Online service. There were 2 or 3 newspapers like that in the country that did that, and they were managed by people who later became KR digital folks, or were already in KR like Bob Ryan. So, this...seems boring to say. The very
first used of the Internet in Charlotte was to exchange email on the back end of an old school BBS.

WHY DO YOU FEEL THE PAPER IN CHARLOTTE WAS SO AHEAD OF THE CURVE?

Charlotte is the second largest banking city in N America to NY. HQ of B of A, and WF are here. Incredible amount of insurance and commerce, very progressive business town. It also has no other competitors nearby. It’s nice to say Charlotte has the right mix of things. But you know Mia, and LA, and Philly had the right mix of things as well, but they never had the sort of singular effort that came out so quickly. And I managed the operations under Bob at KR, for all the KR markets at the end of my era there, and did a lot of analysis of how these markets develop in my time there. And I think that essentially...shortly after that we started Charlotte dot com, as the first website with a geographical name in KR, and we decided not to name the site after the newspaper, but started the whole geography dot com. So, there are a number of characteristics that made some markets successful, I could say selfishly it was because I had great ideas, or because I was pushing the envelope. But it was happening in several markets, it wasn’t just me. But I think the characteristics of the market in the mid 90s that had great success were, there was always an economic sea level, which was good, but things weren’t so bad around the country in most places at that time. The unique characteristics were: a medium to large size market, so it had critical mass, and it did not have, or wasn’t so large that it actually became saturated with competitors that sort of ...there was lots of people getting into this at the same time, there were multiple newspapers who might’ve been independent startup web operations, some TV stations, like in Raleigh NC, actually were doing a better job on the web than the newspapers and magazine in the local area. So when you had more competition, you had…it's like if you
have plants competing in your garden, things aren’t going to grow as fast. So what you saw with KR was, we had 32 markets toward the end, you had the medium to large markets that had very little competition, and had also chosen a geographical name, and that was a strategic choice that we made. We chose a geographical name for the web entity that was a companion to the newspaper, it wasn’t just the newspaper. From the very beginning. The general strategy was move quickly, name it something that makes sense for the whole city and wasn’t just sucked up to the newspaper, and then, at least by our intentions, make it more about the whole city and the whole region that’s convened by the whole newspaper, but don’t make it all just about the newspaper.

YOU COMMENTED ON THE NEWSPAPER BUSINESS BEING SELFISH, WHY DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU WERE PUSHING? WHAT DID YOU SEE THAT MADE YOU WANT TO TAKE YOUR APPROACH, AND DESCRIBE THE PUSHBACK YOU RECEIVED FROM WITHIN THE PUBLICATION?

People who were doing things like I was across the country...If you think of all the different silos of the newspaper management, you know, there’s the newsroom, and then there’s the advertising department, and then there’s production and circulation and technology, and typically those have been very vertical and exclusive silos, I think that the characteristics of people like me and others in the industry who have lives though the last 15 years of this... First of all, they did want to live one silo or another, it’s just restlessness, I think. And then they had, at least enough vision, to know, that, not staying in advertising or not staying in the newsroom...that was not going to be a problem that was not going to be limiting. In others words a lot of people, “if I don’t stay in the newsroom and become executive editor by the time I’m 50, then I don’t really have a career, or if it I don’t stay in the advertising and become a top moneymaking rainmaker, or a top sales person, or the ad exec leader or something, then I don’t have a career. I’ve never seen my career as being limited to those
silos. I’ve always thought I want to pursue what I want to do best, and to me that was always whatever the next technology brought, and all the efficiencies opportunities and money you can make off that technology or whatever I was starting as a photographer or was in the newsroom at the editor, or became a kind of technology CTO guy back in the early days, or moved to being responsible for revenue and advertising, or moved to general managing which some people might consider like a publisher role, those thing never really were distinctions that I worried about. I simply wanted to pursue where the technology would take us, and not because it was bits and bytes and gadgets, but because the technology was consolidating already in the late 80 and early 90s, and it was consolidating the operations and opportunities, and I didn’t know that, you know, in the detailed way I know it now. But I knew enough to know that following the technological backbone of change, which was actually a more active and dynamic path to the future, than a traditional career track, or a traditional model where you just did the same thing for years and years and years.

THOSE PEOPLE WHO LOOKED AT THEIR CAREERS IN THE TRADITIONAL WAY...DO YOU FEEL THAT OUTLOOK LIMITED THEM FROM SEEING THE CHANGES THAT WERE COMING?

We haven’t really finished the description of my career up until now, but, I now own two companies. One of them is consulting and one measuring and metrics and I own digital business and we actually consult with a lot of customers which include Gannett, and Morris, and Media news and another people like that who... and rather than say these people screwed it all up because they didn’t get it and these people were so smart because they did get it, I think its really important to understand that the newspaper business by definition has had to become sort of stuck in a channel, stuck in a groove, because it was more than a
100 year old business...that was predicated on a specific media technology called the printing press, and in its heyday, some of which was still in existence in the 70s, 80s and early 90s, was the only dominant medium in the local market, and by nature of being that medium, was simply commanding most of the media revenue being transacted in the local market. But what happened in the 90s, particularly with the extreme pressure of the last dozens years with the economy and the deconstruction of the newspaper model at least down to what it should be instead of what it was, you essentially had the entire thing that people used to call the newspaper business, is being rapidly transformed in to the audience business in general. And you could say the same of the TV, broadcast TV had their own towers and TV cameras and crews, and they had their own world which they called the TV business, and you could say the same thing of magazines, and cable, which started in the early 80s, I mean HBO was already on cable as a subscriber channel before the pc and the mac were invented. So its not unique to newspaper business, so its unique to traditional media companies who thought legitimately for three decades, and in the newspapers case, almost a 100 year or more, they've always equated, their business with their media. Their medium. So, “I'm in the newspaper business,” as people used to say, or I'm in the TV business or I'm a cable operator, or I'm a magazine publisher, right? Because, you're audience and the medium you used to reach your audience, was one in the same. What happened in the 90s was...this goes back to what people were experiencing. In other words, if no one really saw, or had the cut level intuition, or had the serendipitous opportunity to sort of think through all of this stuff, and none of is really knew where it was going, but those of us that sort of moved on this tangent...in the 90s, I think, had at least a hunch that we needed to follow it. Didn't know how it would turn out, and still don't, but we at least
needed to follow the convergence of technology in a more robust way than before. But there again, if you took a snapshot in the 90s, there were 25, 30 percent profit margins at newspapers, and publishers making half a million dollars a year, just by being the executive of even a middle sized market paper. And job security and large staffs...I worked in Jacksonville Florida for a little while as a photographer, and that newspapers, even before the Morris people bought it, every once in a while, they’d send us all over the Caribbean. I went to Europe for that newspaper. You know, these where days when there was just so much money in the newspaper business, that the majority of people didn’t really ever have to thing about whether it would ever be “different.”

AND SPEAKING OF PROFITS AND RESOURCES, IT SOUNDS LIKE THERE WAS SOME LEVEL OF VISION TO THE “CHARLOTTE.COM” IDEA...WHEN THE PRODUCT WAS LAUNCHED, HOW MUCH OF AN ISSUE WAS THE IDEA OF DIVERTING RESOURCES AWAY FROM THE PRINT PRODUCT, KNOWING IT WOULDN'T TURN THE SAME PROFIT MARGIN?

Right, well, there really was no discussion at the very beginning of whether or not this Internet thing was going to become a rival, or equal, superior product. However, there was a lot of discussion about this branding philosophy. Just at the very beginning. There was less discussion about whether we’re going to make money, whether someone will even pay us for an ad. When we launched Charlotte.com, the very discussion was about why do you want to call it charlotte.com? And the publisher at that time was a guy named Ralph Neal who was a long time KR publisher, had run the paper in Philly and very long time traditional classic, and classy, publisher. And to his credit over the course of some conversations we had this discussion, and I actually don’t know why, but I was very convinced that we can’t just call it the newspaper. Because it’s not just the newspapers, there can be so much more. There’s connectivity, there’s audience, all this other stuff that’s now coming true. But I probably wasn’t even that eloquent about it then, I was just being
stubborn about and saying, look, Charlotte Observer is all about Charlotte, NC, and Charlotte is so much bigger than just what the Observer covered, and the Internet was so much bigger, why we just call it charlotte dot com, and call it “all about Charlotte” instead of only about the Charlotte Observer. And, through a couple weeks of talks, he came in one day and said, I think you’re right, I believe you, let’s do it. So, the very first argument about what we should name it, after that we did have an advertiser or two who wanted to be in on this new thing called Charlotte.com, the actual...we didn’t actually make money in a large degree until the early 2000s, because in the late 90s, KR organized it’s assets in a way that they had a new media group in SJ, and then 1999, KR announced that they were going to separate all the digital resources for the company, then a couple of us became the charter executives of that new company. And then...what I’m saying is, a lot of what we dealt with was organizational and philosophical, capital, not financial capital, toward the end of the 90s and then early 2000s. In that time, by 2001 or 02, through some bookkeeping methods having to do with allocating revenue back and forth, I think Charlotte.com became break even, and I think by the time I left we were operating with a 25 million dollar budget annually. And, advertising, classified contributions, things like that. And you know, who would’ve known, no one knew in the early 90s that 15 years later, that what you’d play around with then would become a 10 to 100 million dollar business.

HOW DID ATTITUDES TOWARD THE NEW PRODUCT CHANGE OR DEVELOP OVER THE YEARS? WERE MANY PEOPLE STILL TREATING IT AS A WASTE OF TIME?

Well in the early days of charlotte.com, before it became a consolidated effort by KR, we didn’t necessarily put the whole paper online. It was pretty much pick and choose in the first few years. We had a couple of online editors, and they’d do some work with us and for us, but then, I remember when I said, ok, let’s work with the front end publishing system,
and this was the benefit of having worked at the tech person and then started managing the new media stuff, because all the plumbing of feeds and classified feeds, they were all sort of under my province and we ended up feeding the whole newspaper over there. So for a long time, and frankly, even made more dramatic by the separation of the digital corporation within KR for the first several years through 2002, under Dan Finnegan, the whole KR digital division and the editors and the sales people and business deals that that whole digital operation did... they were becoming less and less associated with the newspapers. This was on the tail end of when the newspaper initiatives and the internet...a lot of them tried to be like Silicon Valley companies instead of to try serve their partner newspapers, a lot of the executives saw the initiatives in the early 2000s as moving in the direction of a lot of startups, like, lets grow it, lets start it up, and then lets sell it, or then lets go public as a separate company or something like that. Because at that time, most of the money being made on the Internet was in its potential, not what it was actually making at the time. There was actually a time in KR Digital’s history, right in the early 2000s, when all of its employees, including the management, we all had stock options, and tracking stock given to us as part of our compensation. Because the goal for a short time there was to build up KR Digital so rapidly, and with so much potential that we could then go public and have it be a separate, parallel company to KR the founding newspaper company. And within a year or two, in all candor, I thin the strategy was too late. Because the people who had made real money with that strategy had done it two or three years earlier. And in the Internet space. And for newspaper to come along and think that they could duplicate that as that boom was collapsing into the first burst of the bubble, it was a good idea but it was the wrong time to try it. And so what happened was, the sort of outward movement from newspaper
within KR, and this was largely in the industry as well, it reversed itself and in same cases execs changed jobs. And that whole outward push to make money with a public offering just didn’t work. Then Hillary Schneider came in, and the whole motion or movement of KR Digital reversed itself and started becoming more and more close to the newspapers. And then it was, ok lets make sure we have all the classifieds buttoned down, lets make sure we have a content strategy. So, it started working more closely with the newsrooms, lets get the newsrooms more involved in some of the content management. Let’s start cross-selling the whole newspaper as advertising teams. Let’s manage this as a collaborative effort with the newspapers. Let’s have the local digital top managers working directly with the publishers in a mutual accountability relationship. They were at odds with each other before because there was some type of built in competition. If people who work for me were running my Miami, Philly and KC, there job was to actually do things that might actually undermine the newspapers business, at first. But when we sort of reversed the dynamics and said, wait a minute, why don’t we all work together to make money and make audience and progress, then the compensation plan, the strategies, were all brought back together so that the local newspaper publisher, and the local digital general manager...they were made to be responsible for the same things. And the big push there was not really how it changed the digital person’s role. The big push was that KR finally put digital components in the local newspaper publisher’s goals. So the local publisher had to go to school and get fluent in what was going on in the digital space as part of their business. When that shift in strategy changed, and the whole idea of spinning off the company was put to bed, you could say that once it was spun back into the company, that 180 degree change in strategy where we went back to moving toward what is now a very
full integration model, where there’s a 24-hour news cycle, with the newsroom and there are print and online reps selling both, is a totally different world than what we started out trying to build.

Chris Jennewein– Interview conducted June 17, 2011

BIO QUESTION

In 1992 before I moved to the SJMC I was director of information services for the AJC and what I was doing there was supervising some very early online and telephone services. We had telephone hotlines, lines for stocks and sports, weather, several other categories. We also had an online bulletin board service called Access Atlanta. Which still exists, it’s now a website, Access Atlanta dot com. But we used some software that was partly developed by an outsider program. We had 16 incoming modem lines, and it was a very early online service. There was news from several sections of the paper, you could browse classifieds online, there was primitive email, primitive chat, and there was access to archives. All text-based. So it was all fuzzy white letters on a black screen.

WHERE MANY PAPERS IN THE COUNTRY DOING BBS AND PHONE BASED SYSTEMS AT THAT TIME?

There were a few. But I think it’s safe to say that Access Atlanta was far and away the most extensive newspaper project of it’s time...I think Newsday had a very simple bulletin board, and I think Newsday may have. A lot of newspapers of course had their archives available through online research services like Dialogue and there were some others. But Access Atlanta was the best example at the time of a newspaper making a large amount of its content available online through a computer interface.
WHY WAS THE AJC AHEAD OF THE CURVE IN THAT REGARD?

I think it was...trying to think of a good reason for this. I mean personally, I was always interested in the potential, and I personally pushed hard for the AJC to get into this area. I think at the time, most people looked at online as an interesting but not important endeavor. And I think many in traditional media thought that online was foolish.

AND YOU RECOGNIZED YOU HAD INTEREST AND SAWY THE IMPORTANCE?

I recognized both, and I had the good fortune to work with an editor, Ron Martin, and some top people at the Cox corporate office who very supportive.

AND AS FAR AS IN THE NEWSROOM, AND THE PEOPLE DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR UPLOADING THE CONTENT...PUSHBACK FROM THEM?

There wasn’t push back because I had worked in the newsroom for a long time. We had a small staff, three or four people, and we got desks for them in the newsroom. So they actually...would simply go into the system and post it, so the newsroom didn’t really have work to do.

WAS THERE A DISCUSSION OF NEED FOR PROFIT WITH THE EARLY PRODUCT?

Well we charged for it. I think it was 6.95 a month, that was the model back then.

AND WHEN DID YOU LEAVE ATLANTA?

I left Atlanta in 92, I got a call from Bob Ingle who was the executive editor at the SJMC, saying that he had an online project that he was looking to staff, and what struck me was, as supportive as Atlanta had been, and as much as my wife and I liked Atlanta, the opportunity to launch a groundbreaking online service in Silicon Valley was something I couldn’t pass up.

AND DID YOU FIND THE CULTURE WAS DIFFERENT IN SJ WITH REGARD TO INNOVATION?
Well it wasn’t the...KR was equally supportive, maybe even more so. But the environment in Silicon Valley was far more supportive. In Atlanta, when you mentioned you had an online service, people would just have quizzical looks on their faces. In Silicon Valley they immediately asked what speed, what technology, people really understood what this was all about.

AND THE PRODUCT IN SJ WAS AOL BASED?

Initially we did a deal with American Online, and so Merc Center originally existed as a separate content area within AOL. The Chicago Trib had done the same thing a view months before that, but the Merc News version was much more extensive. It was called Merc Center. Merc Center on AOL was probably the first online site that treated breaking news as the focus. Up until that point, most online sites treated the first page, the first view pages, as menus. Think about an academic journal, an old fashioned one, where the cover is just the title of the articles and the page numbers. Well most online sites were that. So you had to go through menus to get to news, there was nothing that just popped up in the screen. And we came up with the idea of having a window on the very first page of Merc Center. And what appeared in there were headlines of breaking news.

AND THAT’S A CONSCIOUS DECISION, OBVIOUSLY...

It was a very conscious decision and a remember a big argument about it, about whether we should have a traditional menu or whether or not we should put news on the home page and it was a pretty contentious argument. And I remember bringing in a copy of the ugliest academic journal I could find, and comparing it to that week’s Newsweek, and saying, see the difference?

AND HOW DID THAT ARGUMENT BREAKDOWN, MAYBE ADVERTISING...
No this was all in editorial.

AND WITHIN EDITORIAL WERE THERE ANY DEPARTMENTS WITHIN THE PAPER THAT WERE MORE OR LESS RECEPTIVE, MAYBE BUSINESS MORE, SPORTS LESS.

The online versus print contention didn’t develop anywhere significantly until the early 90s. In the early 90s, print journalists looked at the online world with a certain amount of puzzlement...a combination of puzzlement and...well puzzlement is probably the best word. They didn’t see it as a threat, they didn’t see it was something that would undermine print, and they weren’t particularly interested in succeeding. They found it puzzling and a curiosity.

AND HOW DO YOU THINK THAT AFFECTED THE WAY IT DEVELOPED?

Online newspapers were largely developed by people who had visions, and in many cases were a little bit outside the traditional structure. You know if you were an editor on the way up in a print newsroom, you didn’t want to hurt your career by going off and doing something online. But if you were a visionary type who liked trying new things and was not afraid of maybe making mistake, had a lot of self-confidence, you might try online.

WAS THERE A MICROPAY SYSTEM IN PLACE AT MERC CENTER?

Well it was through AOL who at the time charged 7.95 a month and we got a percentage of that. In the early days, with all these services, you were really buying access to an online world, a very limited online world, but access nonetheless. And in the process of getting that access you got the content.

AND IT WAS A FEW YEARS LATER WHEN THE DISCUSSION OF “CANNIBALIZING THE PRINT PRODUCT” CAME UP?

I didn’t hear the word cannibalize until the mid 90s. It’s...this happens in every industry.

The new ideas, the better ideas, ultimately kill the old ones. And the only thing that you can
effectively do is jump headlong into the new idea. You can't fight it, you can't delay it. And most companies, most organizations, can't do that. Most organizations keep doing the same old things until they collapse ultimately. And we've seen that across the board in industry after industry. The only modern company...one of the best examples of a company that really rethought itself and changed is Intel in the mid 80s. There's a book, Only The Paranoid Survive, by Andy Grove. Every one knows Intel now, they make microprocessors, but do you know what they made up until the mid 80s? They made memory chips. Now that may seem to be very similar, but it's not. Out in Silicon Valley this was sort of a legend out there. The memory chips were different than microprocessors. And at the time, Intel was getting clobbered by Japanese and Korean companies. And they made a decision to get out of what was the biggest part of their business, and in fact the business they had been founded to pursue, and focus on a side business which was microprocessors. And that would've been equivalent to newspapers in the mid 90s selling off presses and jumping headfirst into online. Very, very few companies can do this, and especially established companies with a lot of revenue. You know they'd all rather say, well gee I'd rather have the 2 billion I make on print than the few million I make online, and who knows what's going to happen there. But the end result is always the same: the business is eventually gone. And anybody can see this now, but it's tough to see upfront.

BUT IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU WERE SOMEWHAT AWARE AT THE TIME THAT YOU WERE FIGHTING SOMEWHAT OF A LOSING BATTLE...

You know there's an analogy I used, which I don't think a lot of people got, but I said I had hoped that Knight Ridder could be the Studebaker of the newspaper industry. And the reason for that was that Studebaker was the one horse and buggy maker that successfully transitioned into automobiles. They only made to like the 70s, they were producing in
Canada. But everyone else who was making horse and buggies went away in 1910 and 1915. SO, on the one hand, a lot people joke about Studebakers because it was an also ran, and it wasn’t the strongest of automobiles. But they managed to do 50 years. Which I think is pretty impressive.

SO AT THE MERC NEWS…BESIDES THE GEOGRAPHY, YOU PLACE A LOT OF IT ON HAVING BOB INGLE, AND...

Bob Ingle was great, a guy named Bill Mitchell who was my boss...my job basically was to make this thing happen by hook or by crook.

AND GOING BACK TO PROFITABLITY, WHEN DID THAT BECOME AN ISSUE IN SAN JOSE?

Oh from the beginning, we were trying to make money from the beginning. The problem is that...with many new ideas, you need to start them at, or with, very little cost, and you need to acknowledge it may be a little while before you become very profitable. Google is a great example of this. Great idea, great traffic, and then finally they made it profitable. Incredibly profitable. And people say, well, you can’t make money on content. Well Google is making money on content, its making hand over fist. Google is bigger than the entire newspaper industry was at its height. But what a lot of newspapers did was they were either too slow, or their costs were too high, they staffed up these divisions too high, that sort of thing. There are a lot of reasons why it was difficult for most newspapers to make the transition. I still hope a few do, I think the New York Times is well positioned.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THEIR PAYWALL IDEA?

I think pay walls are stupid. And I think a number of places have to go through a number of failures before they can figure that out. Take a look at the WSJ. The WSJ used to be a key player in terms of shaping American political opinion. People would talk about the op-eds and the editorial in the WSJ. They would talk about stories in the WSJ. But when the pay
wall went up, you hardly ever hear any one talk about the WSJ anymore. You know they've done pretty well generating an online revenue stream, but after the people who have grown up with the print wall street journal die, are they still going to have the same influence? And I think the NYT is risking that in order to generate a bigger current revenue stream. But I think it’s still the NYT’s time to lose.

AND HOW LONG DID YOU STAY IN SJ?

Well KR set up a corporate online division and I was the first director and then I was the VP of operations. And I was there until 2001, and then I went to the San Diego Union Tribune to run sign on San Diego, which was in it’s day an extremely profitably newspaper operation.

AND DID GEOGRAPHY HAVE A HAND IN THAT AS WELL?

Well San Diego at the time had one of the largest high-speed cable broadband networks through Cox. So it was a great market to do things like video and to really push online. At it’s height, which I believe was 2007...we hit 17 million in revenue and our costs were under 10 million, so it was extremely profitable. Now the argument you’d always hear is, well, you aren’t paying for the presses, you aren’t paying for the newsroom, but we would’ve had those assets anyways. So, what online represented was almost pure incremental profits.

DID YOU EVER NOTICE THAT POSSIBLY CERTAIN PEOPLE’S IDEAS REGARDING INNOVATION WERE DISCOUNTED BASED ON THEIR AGE OR STATUS?

Honestly, because I’ve been in online so long, I can’t say I noticed that. Because we would always have groups that were composed of some older people, and some younger people. Maybe if I had been in the newsroom during this period I would've seen that. But at least the online divisions of newspapers were very welcoming of new ideas and new people.
Fred Mann - Interview conducted May 26, 2011

BIO QUESTION

In 1990 I guess I was the assistant managing editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer. Ran the features section and a lot of the Sunday sections, most of the stuff that wasn't news, business, or sports. Then around 1994, the people at the paper, the editor, and others started talking about the Internet. And how it was becoming a big deal, we needed to be on there, how did we get the newspapers on there...and it was going to be the first project that the two major daily newspapers in Philly, the Inquirer and the Daily News, ever did together editorially. They were two papers owned by the same company, the same building, they shared advertising and circulation and marketing and production, but the two newsrooms competed against each other tremendously. The Inquirer was the big broad sheet paper, seen days a week, and the Daily News was a little six days a week feisty tabloid, and this was going to be a blending of the two voices in an online setting. And I was chosen to run that project, which I did for 11 years.

WHAT WAS YOUR LEVEL OF EXPERIENCE WITH THAT MEDIUM BEFORE BEING SELECTED TO RUN THE OPERATION?

Haha, zero.

WHY DO YOU FEEL YOU WERE SELECTED THEN?

Haha, good question. I didn't know for the longest time. The editor of the paper at that time, Max King, came to me and said what do you know about this Internet stuff, and I said, nothing Max. And he said, well we've got to be on the Internet, and I said, I'm sure you're right, and he said you're gonna be the guy that takes us there. And I said, why? He said, you know all about this electronic stuff. Because about 6 months earlier I had helped set up what was a short-lived TV show in Philly called Inquirer News tonight. And it was really
kind of putting the next day’s paper on TV in a local broadcast the night before. And it was supposed to be this fabulously innovative project, but it didn’t really get off the ground and wasn’t a success. But I did it for a few months before it crashed and burned. And I said, Max, what I know about television is that I watch television, and now you’re asking me about online, and I don’t know what the hell I’m talking about…I later realized that the real reason that he picked me was because he thought I could bridge this gap between the two newspapers. I could make the Inquirer and the Daily news play together. It was clearly not because of my background, or my capacity for technological things. And so I was kind of the connector between the two newspapers. And the first thing I did was figure out who around knew something about the Internet and there were a few people that knew some but not much. And so I put out a call to various universities in Philadelphia, of which there are many, to come help us learn about what this new thing was. And I didn’t get much response from University of Penn, or Villanova or Drexel, but Temple, which was just up the street from the paper…they called back and a couple of guys said we’re gonna be down to help you tomorrow afternoon to teach you about the Internet. And a couple of young guys came down to lecture a bunch of us about the Internet. As it turns out, one of the guys didn’t know much about what he was talking about, but the other guy was pretty good. So I hired him. And, I recruited some other folks from the newsrooms, and some from outside the newspaper, and put together a small staff, and we started up.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE ATTITUDE WITHIN THE NEWSROOM TOWARD THIS IDEA OF UNIFYING PAPERS AND PUBLISHING ONLINE? WERE PEOPLE GENERALLY OPEN TO IT?

There were a few that were interested in the idea. But in the newsrooms themselves, and in the advertising and circulations parts of the paper, I would say that it is safe to say that
people were very wary of this. They didn’t quite get it, they weren’t sure why we should be doing this, they didn’t know what the audience would be. Particularly from the business side people, they said, what are you talking about, you’re going to give away our content, online, for free? Why? And we had started out like a lot of people did in those days...Bob and the Merc News in SJ were ahead of us, and the Times and Post, but not too many...and we had all looked at, do we put up a pay curtain? Do we not? Do we...what’s happening? And we quickly realized if we put up a pay curtain nobody would come to our site, this was new and open and free. So we really had no choice, and that’s the way we went. But I would say the response in the newsrooms, and I would say in the newsrooms in particular, was borderline hostile. But I would say our newsroom always bordered on hostile so that really wasn’t surprising.

WHY DO YOU THINK THAT WAS FROM THE NEWSROOM? THE EXTRA WORK?

Yeah. Exactly. This was one more thing that we were going to ask them to do. We were going to say, look, if you go out and your covering a story, and you know you’re deadline isn’t until 8 o’clock tonight, but you’re back at noon, look we want you to write a brief on it and put it on the website. And that didn’t go over real well. And, Philadelphia is a very unionized town, and the papers were heavily unionized, and this was you know more work for no extra pay, and there was not the greatest working relationship between management and the unions as it was, so it was looked at as one more extra thing to do and people didn’t really understand why yet. In fact, when we first started, we had a big meeting with the publishers, and the editors, and the circulation VP, and the ad VP and everybody about this new concept, this new online thing, and the publisher said, well, if we’re going to create a new union here, should they be in the union? Or not? And
everybody around the table said, not. Except for me and Max King, the editor of the
Inquirer who both said, look, we’re asking reporters for their help, for their work. You can’t
expect any help from the newsrooms if you’re going to say you have to be outside the union
to do this work. That’s insane. And we carried the day, and we offered the newspaper guild
jurisdiction over this new Internet world, and it took us months of negotiating with the
guild for us to get them to do this, I think in large measure because they thought it was
some sort of trick, or trap, or they couldn’t believe that this was going to be some big new
medium that we were offering them jurisdiction over. That’s the kind of relationship that
existed at the newspapers at this time.

YOU SAID YOUR EDITOR USED THE PHRASE, “WE HAVE TO BE ON THE INTERNET.”
WOULD YOU DESCRIBE HIM AS AN INNOVATIVE GUY? THAT PHRASE SOMEWHAT MAKES
IT SOUND LIKE THE MOVE WAS FORCED...

Yeah, he was an innovative guy. And he was just, more aware than most, I think he saw the
NY times online, and San Jose was also owned by the same parent company we were,
Knight Ridder, and we just saying, hey look, this is happening, we have to do this.

AND DID YOU HAVE ANY SORT OF VISION OF WHAT YOU WANTED TO ACCOMPLISH
WITH THE SITE?

We developed one pretty quickly. Looked around on what we had all been, or most of us, I
certainly had been up to my eyeballs in daily newspaper sections. So it wasn’t something I
had focused on all that much. But, once it became my job, yeah that’s what I focused on. And
actually, when we first began, we were in a partnership with the New House paper in New
Jersey. And we were going to launch an online site with them, and we had lots of meeting
with lawyers, and as it turns out we never did. We each had separate things. But that
helped kind of focused the business side folks on this being an important new project. And
from a journalism perspective, it didn’t take a genius to think, hey we were really are going
to draw a new audience here, not sure how big it’s going to get, but we need to offer things that are different than the way they read in the kind of somber Philadelphia Inquirer, and the mixing of the Enq. Style and the Daily News style was a real benefit to us. Because the Enq. Was known as a very authoritative paper, very complete paper, big investigative series, but Pulitzer Prize winners every year. And, the Daily News was this feisty, short, fast, full of attitude kind of paper. And mixing them together, you know, mixing them up side by side, was appealing. So, it wasn’t particularly appealing to either paper because it wasn’t entirely their identity, it was something new, but to the audience, they liked it. And we became a pretty big hit right away.

HOW EARLY WAS PROFITIBILITY MENTIONED AS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE? WERE YOU GIVEN A LEASH ON THAT FRONT?

We probably got three years where they didn’t hassle us too much. Which, for KR, was amazing. Because they’re very bottom line oriented. But you knew going into that 3rd year that they were going to like to see some dollars starting to happen. And it did, and we had a real good growth rate for many years that I was doing this. We would grow 30, 35, 40 percent a year, but we started from nothing. So it was still, in terms of actual dollars, so during my time it was never gigantic. I don’t even remember what our revenue was during my times, but we were one of the biggest and most successful revenue wise of any of the KR papers. We had 28 online in all the different markets, big and small. And Philadelphia was the biggest market, so it should’ve had the most success.

WHAT SORT OF CHANGES DID YOU SEE OVER THOSE 12 YEARS, AS FAR AS IN THE ATTITUDES IN THE NEWSROOM? DID THEY JUST WARM UP TO THE IDEA OR DID YOU DO SOMETHING, AS FAR AS THEIR WORKLOAD TO REDUCE THE IMPACT OF THAT?

They certainly warmed up to it after a while, but during my time, I mean I left there 5 years ago. And even 5 years ago I mean the newspapers had officially embraced it, it was part of
peoples jobs, we had liaisons in the newsrooms to make sure content was being produced and was fresh during the day and it was getting better and better all the time. But it was a slow haul there for a while, for a long while. You know, individual champions who believed in online journalism. And once they had some success, others would pay attention and follow. But some had to be pulled into it. I think the biggest single success we had in all that was...I wanna say in 98, early on anyway, when...what happened was a good friend of mine who was an excellent reporter Mark Bowden, who was gone one to write many books and movies. And mark had an idea for a newspaper series. And I went to A Phillies game with another editor and friend of mine and he was telling me about it. And he was going to be the editor on the series. And I said, Dave, if you’re planning a big series let’s make sure the online folks are in on it from the beginning. I mean usually what happened, I’m sure it’s still true most places, the newspaper would work on some big series, and then the newspaper would call on Friday and say, hey can you put this online, but we were saying no, let’s get in on the ground floor. Help plan how this was done, think about multimedia, and think about different pieces of this that can really shine online. And the piece that Mark Bowden was doing was a piece called Blackhawk Down. And he wrote Blackhawk Down as a newspaper series, an online series, and later a book, and later a movies. And it was a great experience because we had one of online editors in all their planning meetings, making suggestions, figuring out what pieces we could put online, it was not a traditional newspaper series in that it wasn’t 3 or 4 parts. I believe it ran something like 36 or 38 straight days. Short, relatively short compared to regular Philadelphia Inquirer series, which are usually... used to be gigantic things. And Bowden found that he was really helped by it being online. He’d run a few parts and he’d get email, and he’d answer all the email.
And people would say hey you know, this is what really happened next. It was the story of Somali and the American helicopters and the troops parade through the streets and a real ugly situation...but he would get the soldiers involved. They’d see this online, and they’d give him leads of other things write about, and he thought this was just fabulous, instant feedback, in the midst of writing his series. So when we published Blackhawk Down we won all these awards, all these online awards, for journalism, in addition to the other praise that Mark got for the print series, and we would include video interviews that Mark had done, outtakes with different soldiers, a whole lot of stuff. Stuff that today was kind of routine but back then it was not. But Mark’s embrace of this being online was huge in the newsroom. Because he was a major reporter, and people saw it, and he was saying look I’m getting a lot of accolades. You guys are nuts if you’re not playing along with the online stuff here. So it was finding some champions like that really helped considerably.

DO YOU FEEL THAT PEOPLE’S IDEAS WERE DISCOUNTED AT ALL BASED ON STATUS, EVEN THOUGH LESS EXPERIENCED EMPLOYEES MIGHT KNOW MORE ABOUT THE MEDIUM? OR JUST NEW TO EVERYBODY?

It was pretty new to everybody. But in general, yeah, younger reporters and editors probably gravitated to it faster. But, I think the downside became not as much editorial as it was financial. Particularly around 2000 and later, and newspapers were starting their downhill slide, and people were saying two things. They were blaming free online distribution, for hurting circulation and hurting advertising. And then they were saying, hopefully online is going to save us. Because it’s growth is going to take the places of prints decline. And I would sit in these meetings with the publisher and the operating committee, and hear the advertising VP say that, well, we didn’t quite make our target this month. And I would look at our ad growth, and it was pretty good. Pretty good. But, it started way down
at the bottom of the page. And I just thought, doing the math is not my strong suit, but I
could tell that if we online were going to save the print newspaper, it was not going to
happen until the print newspaper was way down on it’s cost and employees and all that. I
just didn’t see the online rescuing the day, quite as much as other did. And it didn’t. And KR,
like many other companies, it was just involved in cutting costs, that I started to see in the
early to mid 2000s, that my staff wasn’t growing anymore, it was being cut. Went from 50
something people down to 22. And I thought, this is not going the right direction.
Newspapers tried hard to figure out how to make this work, and you know they could have
been more forward thinking, but at the same time. It wasn’t all bad, we did some good
journalism and we learned a lot of stuff. I think back fondly on those days. And I thought we
were being pretty innovating, but then you’d turn around and see companies that were not
innovative being a lot more innovative.

IS THAT JUST A CULTURE ISSUE?
Yeah. A lot of it. KR as a company that paid all of our checks, and they were used to doing
things a certain way, and as Bob Ryan may have told you, we made a decisions that each of
these 28 markets we had that each had their own websites, large or small, they needed to
be centralized. And this around 99, 2000, And they formed KRD, which was kind of the
digital wing of the company, and that was helpful in many ways, but in many it took away
local control, and as it took away local control it took away some of the connection with the
local paper. And it was an up and down ride, I would say. But I think newspaper culture just
was not going to respond to this changing environment as quickly as startups and other
companies, and I think newspapers suffered from that.
BIO QUESTION

Well in 1993 I had taken a year off from the Washington Post newspaper to do a fellowship for the Freedom Forum. And the Freedom Forum wanted me to go into the DC high schools and recreate the journalism programs there. So I took a year off and I was the news executive for the DC high school journalism program funded by the Freedom Forum. And that was my first executive level position. But from a new media standpoint, while I was there, each of the school had a Macintosh computer. And they were still doing their newspapers the old fashioned way, so I had to train the students and the advisers there on how to use their Macintosh. And they didn’t have phone lines in some of the schools, so I had to get phone lines put in so they could go online and actually transmit some of their stories through dial up. And at the same time I was president of the Washington association of black journalists, so I started setting up spreadsheets and stuff to do all my organizational work. When I got back from the Freedom Forum fellowship to the Washington Post, I knew that I wanted to go into online. But there was really nothing available at the Washington Post, and only a few things available in Washington. AOL was small back then and it was out in Virginia. It wasn’t until 1995 that the WP was gearing up for its first online edition called Digital Ink, and that was the first online version of the WP. So I moved over there, as the Metro editor in 1995 in April. It was like three days before the Oklahoma City bombing, which changed everything for us.

FOR THE PAPER, OR FOR THE ONLINE...

For the online. Because up until that point, what we were allowed to do by the WP was to put a couple of articles from the newspaper up in the morning, and then in the afternoon
we’d put a couple more up. And then we did some interactive stuff on our own, trying to flesh it out, because this is the early days of online. So we would do some interactive stuff, like we had a database of restaurants, we had what would be considered chat now, but we had discussions with food critics, restaurant critics, the federal government columnist. So when the OKC bombing happened three days into my time at Digital Ink, we had to do updates live, and we had to do updated instantaneously. And I’ll never forget that day, we’re pulling all kinds of content trying to get it up on the site doing breaking news, and I went back to my editors at the Post and asked if we could have a story from the WP to put on the site midday. And it was like “oh my god, we can’t give you that, suppose we get it wrong, we’re still reporting, we have to talk to the lawyers.” And my response to them was, ok, you can give us a story, or my other alternative was to use one of these young people that I had hired straight out of school, to write a story on the WP site and it was going to be written by these kids. So they got together with the editors and the lawyers, and they gave us like a 15-inch story about 1 o’clock that day. So I think from then on, we really knew that medium really lent itself to breaking news, getting people information, putting the maps on there, photos on there, having people comment on what was happening out in Oklahoma, and it was just a whole new day. And for that moment, I just absolutely loved online. And I mean I was interested in it before, really interested, I knew it was going to be the next big thing, but I had this amazing passion for it that I used to be at the office until 10 or 11 o’clock at night every day.

And was that obsession primarily because you saw it as the next big thing, or was it a certain aspect of it, or just that that’s what was coming?

Well when I did that fellowship for the Freedom Forum and I was doing the high school
thing, I had gone up to the University of Michigan to meet with the Friendly Foundation. It was a bunch of us who were doing work with high school journalism. And the woman who was the GA for the Friendly Foundation, she came to the meeting. And just before we were getting started, she was talking about how excited she was about her new computer that coming in because it has a CD-ROM. Now none of us at the meeting, including the people from U of M, knew what a CD-ROM was. And this was January of 1993. And here I was a person who was getting my feet wet in this whole online world. I was subscribed to a couple of publications on Prodigy, I knew what Compuserve and AOL were, but I had no idea what a CD-ROM was. So when the meeting was over and I was going to fly back to DC, I stopped by the Ann Arbor bookstore on campus and picked up this magazine. And it was the prototype for this new magazine that was going to be called Wired. And I read it on the plain going home, read the whole magazine in an hour and a half, and by the time I got off the plane I was like, oh my god. This is going to change everything. This new media thing, this online thing, it's coming. I've got to do this. So when my fellowship year was up that fall, I met with the Metro editor of the WP and he was like, what do you want to do. And I was like well I really don't want to go back to covering government; I'm really no interested in that. I really want to do this online thing, that's what I'm passionate about. And he's like, what is that? And I'm explaining things to him from the magazine, and he's like, well where would you work? And I said well there's this little company out in Virginia called AOL, maybe I could do that. And he was like, just come on back to the newspaper, cover higher education and schools, and we'll figure it out later. Don't walk off; don't go just do this online thing. And I went back a year and a half later, Digital Ink was born, and I went down and took a certificate class at GW Univ. It was mostly about desktop publishing, a little bit
about databases and online. So I got a certificate in that, so that helped me when they started hiring for the online division, and they brought me in. And you know, I knew I wanted to do it, and I knew it was going to change everything, but when that breaking news hit, it was like, we had to invent everything. And there were so many times where we invented thing that we’re using now. When the Pope came to Baltimore back in 95 or 96, he was at the Orioles stadium. And we had this method where we took index cards, and passed them down the aisles, and had people write little short snippets of what they were thinking about the Pope’s visits. And they’d pass that back to editorial assistants, all these people that were working for me. And they’d call in on a cell phone, and I’d type them into this queue, and kept publishing every few minutes. So it was Twitter. Twitter before Twitter, we just made it. We knew we wanted to have these little short snippets. And we just made up things as it presented itself. And it was so freeing to just say, ok this has never been done before, how do we do this? When we went to the web in 1996, I created the first Washington Metro map. It took me weeks to painstakingly do HTML, because we hand coded at the WP, to do the HTML linking each station to the next one, to link ATMS, to link PDFs of train schedules, it took weeks of looking at all this little code to do. And in the process of doing that, I learned a lot about HTML. We hand coded at the WP, and it wasn’t until about a year or so into this that one of my interns was like, why are you guys hand coding? And he helped kind of create what became the content management system for washingtonpost.com. Which later became one of the larger content management systems out there that other newspapers used. And he was like this brilliant student that I found that was working at the applied sciences laboratory, he was like a student for that out in Baltimore. But his full time gig was like as a stock boy for CVS. And I was like, well why
don’t you come work for me, and he did. And he created this content management system so we could do more database driven content management rather than you know hand coded pages the way we were doing it before.

IT SOUNDS LIKE A VERY INNOVATIVE OPERATION. WHAT WAS MANAGEMENT’S LEVEL OF SUPPORT FOR YOU TRYING ALL THESE THINGS?

They were pretty much indifferent to be perfectly honest. In 1995, 96, the main business of the WP was the WP newspaper. You still had 1200 people working in the editorial department. Over at Digital Ink and then WP.com, in the early days, we probably had 15 people working on the editorial side full-time, plus a whole bunch of interns and part timers that worked for me, because local was the biggest. We needed to do restaurant reviews; we needed to do all kinds of other things. And so they were pretty much indifferent. Where they got involved was, you had to appeal to their own selfish interests. So for example, we started doing these discussion forums. If you go to WP and you look at the live discussions, we’ve been doing those for years. And one of the ways that I got the international editor to allow us to use some of their content early and to occasionally let some of the international reporters answer questions, was, I explained to him, you know you’re reporters over in Africa or Europe of wherever, they can actually see their content online. We can send them the software, you know, you had to dial up using a floppy disk, and AT&T’s Interchange which was a competitor to AOL and Compuserve. And the editor was like, you mean I don’t have to ship bundles of the newspaper to them in whatever God forsaken place they were, and it would take two weeks for them to get it? And it was like no; they can see what they wrote today, tonight. If you give me the copy early. So you had to make all these bargains with people. And so the newspaper was very reluctant to let us put everything up from the newspaper and to enhance that. We used to have this system
where, back then... we would call them links now, but back then we called them refers. Where you were reading an article from the WP on our site, we would have refers to additional information. Let’s say there was a bombing in Israel or Palestine, and we wanted to show a map of where the bombing occurred. And maybe the BBC had a better map, or some newspapers over in Israel had a better map of where the bombing took place. We had to come up with a list everyday of the list of refers that we wanted to put on the site. And we had to submit those to the newspaper everyday by 5 pm. So everybody had to get there refers in for local, for arts and entertainment, for sports. And they had to approve them. Because it was ok to link to a map from the BBC, maybe. It wasn’t ok to link to a map from say, an Arab publication. Or a non-profit organization that had a map of where the bombings took place. It was ok to link to this type of publication about a sports thing, but not ok to link to that one. So they had to approve every single refer that we had. They had to improve any enhancements we did on the site. They looked at everything. Well, not everything, but yeah...for the most part they were indifferent unless they thought it would interfere in the brand of the newspaper, so we had to get permission. But there were thing that we were allowed to do ourselves. Like, we were trying to get community engagement. So the first winter that we were up, we had one of these Snow-mageddons in Washington where it was like a ton of snow, people were stuck in their houses because DC couldn’t get the streets clean. And we had this fun little thing where we had Sox the cat, because Clinton was still in office, and the snow was coming up to Sox’s knees and then his shoulders and his whiskers. And we redrew it where he was sitting on the US budget. And it kept coming up and coming up. And oh my god. People loved that thing so much, it just went viral. So we could do fun little things like that, but the newspaper was just like, well you can’t put this
investigative story up, you can’t do that, run on Sunday And were like, can we get the story ahead of time so that we can do enhancements to it. You don’t want to do a 5 part series on Sunday and then have to run around trying to find assets to make it more enhanced. You know like photo galleries, and stuff like that. So we would ask, can we get it a few days in advance so that we can start doing the enhancements? I mean you almost had to like ransom your first born and be like, WE PROMISE we aren’t going to put it up before Sunday. We just need the copy so we can see what you’re writing about and we can go find additional information. And it was like, my god, here’s a pint of blood, can I get it back after Sunday when you see I didn’t put the story up. It was crazy.

IT SEEMS LIKE EARLY ON YOU IDENTIFIED TWO REALLY IMPORTANT PARTS OF THE MEDIUM, ONE BEING THE COMMUNITY ASPECT AND THE OTHER THE WHOLE ADDED VALUE ASPECT...HOW DID YOU KNOW THAT SORT OF THING SO EARLY?

Well I think that the staff when we became WP.com, we were just intuitive about it. We had a lot of young people, and they had this intuition about it, plus we were willing to experiment. I was one of the few people that came out of the WP to work at WP.com. There was a handful of us including Jim Brady. He was like employee number 4 and I was number 5 or something like that. So we knew kind of what we wanted to do and we were open to a lot of things. But for me specifically, as the local editor, what I had to work with was, and if you know anything about the WP it’s that it was hard to get the WP outside of Washington. It’s not a national newspaper like the NYT where you can pick up a copy in Chicago or St. Louis. The WP you can only get in the Washington Metropolitan area, you could get around the train station or airports in Philadelphia, Baltimore and NYC, but if you were in Chicago or Detroit, forget about it, you just couldn’t get a copy of the newspaper. So we went online, people from around the country could finally read their WP. People who had moved from
Washington or just loved the WP reputation, they could finally read it. So for Metro, as the local editor, the WP had the highest penetration of any big city newspaper in the local area. So on any given day 80% of Washingtonians had already read the newspaper. So for me to just take local content and put it online, everyone had already read it. Homeless people had already read it that morning. So it was like that didn’t make any sense. So I always had to come up with, what would bring people back to check out the local area of WP.com. So I always had to think like that. So having that Metro Map that people could do, having a system where people could communicate with each other. Back in 1995, the city of Washington, the city council, did not have an email system that was reliable. They used the Digital Ink communication system to communicate with each other after 5 o clock. So after they went home, they could send files back and forth to each other. And they were like can we just use your system after 5 o clock? And we were like yeah, you have an account, go ahead. This is the city council. I used to do things like…. I hired these 5 or 6 editorial people, content developers, and their job was to go to the clerk’s for the council for the city of Washington and all the suburbs. They each had a beat. So they would go to the clerk’s office, take a floppy disk with them, every Tuesday or Wednesday download all the legislation that was going to be discussed at next week’s council meetings. And that was one of the things that we could do. Most newspapers reported on things after they happened. The city council voted last night 5 to 3 on XYZ. Unless it was a major controversial issue when they would do a preview. Like, coming up this Tuesday they’re going to vote on requiring sex education in the 3rd grade, you know, whatever it is. We would get the full legislation, and we would tout the fact that in our local section, citizens could go and read full legislation of something that’s going to be discussed and voted on at
a local council meeting. People loved that. No newspaper could do that before, and unless you were civic activists and you went downtown and got a copy of the agenda and all the legislation, it wasn’t available. We did that; we did the local arts and entertainment where you could look up restaurants, we did chats with our more popular columnists like the restaurant critic and automotive critic, or the guy who was the federal community columnist who wrote about the federal government from a workers standpoint, the people who worked for the federal government. These were hugely popular, that people could go online and ask these people questions. It was funny, that guy was so paranoid about online, so when it was his appointed time to answer questions he would just sit in front of his computer and just be online, because he thought that the computer could see him. And you had promised to do this. And it was like, no no no, it can’t see you, but I do need you to answer at least five questions for federal employees for something that you wrote about. So, we just had to come up with stuff. I love telling my students about the day the OJ Simpson verdict was announced. We were still on Digital Ink, on dial up. And we knew how slow it was back then, most people had 286s, 386s. So we came up with two front pages for Digital Ink. One said OJ Simpson guilty; one said OJ Simpson not guilty. So we had them ready. And then we took this big television monitor that was on a stand. And we took it down to outside of the Washington Post building. And we were on the second floor at the time in this tiny cramped space behind the cafeteria. And we ran extension cords from our office down to this monitor. We hooked it up, so as soon as the verdict was read on CNN, we pressed the button, and you know 5 or 6 minutes later that’s how slow this thing was, it said Not Guilty. And so people walking by the WP building, we had our students and our staff standing down there, we had people down there for a few hours saying, you can write
up your opinion, type it in, type it in. If I type it in, where’s it gonna go? It’s gonna on the Washington Post’s online site. So people would come up, and they’d say, well I think it was terrible they found him not guilty, or I’m glad that they did it...We uploaded that, and people were like oh my god, you can do that? What is this thing? So we tried a little bit of everything. And the more you tried...You would get a response on some things; you wouldn’t get a response on some things. So it’s just a matter of experimenting. And we loved it. Because we knew that we could iterate quickly, sell cheaply, we didn’t have to go through a whole bunch of hoops getting permission from the newspaper, again unless it directly involved their brand, like trying to get a story ahead of time. So we were free to do it. And they ignored us. And it wasn’t until a few years later that they realized that this could be a business. And they sent over a guy named Christopher Mas, who had been at Newsweek, who was kind of into technology. They hired him as the senior VP, and he came over to WP.com to sort of whip it into shape into a real business. Then they brought the current publisher of the WP, Kathryn Waymoth, they brought her in as the general council. Then they brought one of the editors from the newspaper, Doug Seaver from the VA desk to be the editor of WP.com. So this is like 97. So for two years we were kind of in the background just sort of doing whatever we wanted to do. And around that time, a lot of the young people that I originally hired, they just got fed up with the bureaucracy, and the...it had become more like the newspaper. So a ton of them decamped and went over to, say, AOL. And a lot of the early ones became quite wealthy. And the online site, it became bigger, and it became more valuable for the company. And the culture changed a little bit, to being more legacy.
AND HOW MUCH WAS IT DISCUSSED WITH YOU THAT THIS NEEDED TO TURN A PROFIT?

We were aware of it, we were aware that we were trying to make a business. One of the things that WP.com did, from early on...You know it was a smaller staff and one of the reasons I loved working there was because it was the first time as a reporter that I was privy to the discussions about the business side. And I found that fascinated. Because I went on to be VP of content for bet.com, where I was as responsible for revenues as I was for content. But one of the things that we said early on was that we wouldn't do added value for the WP.com. If you bought...if you were a current dealer and you bought an ad in the WP, you wouldn't get an ad on WP.com as added value. You'd pay another 10 dollars and get an ad on WP.com. It was like, no. We always had high CPMs, and we sold that to these companies, independently and we had our own ad sells department and our own business development, and it helped the WP.com make money early on. I can’t remember when the company became profitable, but we were all very much aware that we wanted to be a successful business that could stand on its own. And if you look at the alumni of those early people who started working at Digital Ink and WP.com, you had people like Jim Brady, and Jody Brannon, and people like (inaudible) who won a Knight News grant recently....(lists several of her early colleagues and their successful business endeavors). So that early group kind of dispersed, and I think were very influential in the online community. Even people like Mindy McAdams, she's one of the best online journalism instructors in the country. She went down there from WP.com (lists more colleagues and achievements). So I think that’s the legacy. We took what we learned from those early years and we’ve just been at this ever since in the online community. And I don’t know of any of us that went back to traditional journalism. And we’re continuing to be entrepreneurs,
we’re continuing to be innovators, and I still love it. All these days later, I still really love it online media and what I do.

Steve Yelvington – Interview conducted on July 1, 2011

BIO QUESTION

In the early 90s I was at the Star Tribune in Minneapolis. And I was there for about 13 years. I left in 1999.

SO YOU WERE THERE WHEN THEY FIRST WENT ONLINE

I was.

AND WHAT WAS YOUR POSITION AT THAT TIME?

I was the first editor of the first online service. Started that on April Fool’s Day on 1994.

AND THEY DIDN’T HAVE ANYTHING UP AT THAT POINT?

No. There had been projects up to do some facts related additions, and previously, I think they may have been feeding news to Compuserve in the early 90s, late 80s. There were some newspapers doing that and I think Minneapolis and St Louis were on that list. Detroit. Maybe four or five newspapers. But when I was at the Star Tribune, when I joined it in 1985, that was already over with. So that would’ve had to have been before then.

AND WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE MEDIUM AT THAT POINT, WHEN YOU GOT THE JOB IN ’94?

I was an editor with the newspaper for a long time. And I had used online services the entire time I worked for the paper. I got a modem about a week after I moved to Minneapolis and discovered the world of dial up bulletin boards, and got very interested in it, and wound up running one myself. Through that, I learned about projects like KR’s teletext service, and or course Compuserve, and Prodigy, etc., and the Internet. And I was
involved in writing software to connect my computer to Usenet. And so when the newspaper began to get interested in electronic publishing, seeing the explosive growth of services like AOL and Prodigy, believing that was a future worth exploring, I was sort of a logical candidate to lead that process.

AND IN THAT PROCESS, HOW WAS IT GENERALLY RECEIVED BY THE PEOPLE YOU WERE MANAGING?

Well the people I was managing were never the problem, because I selected them.

AND THOSE PEOPLE JUST WORKED ON ONLINE STUFF, OR WERE THEY ALSO STILL RESPONSIBLE FOR PRINT SIDE DUTIES?

Well Bob Shieffer was named the publisher, and I was named the editor of this project. And we were given a lot of free reign and a lot of resources. So we were able to put together a staff of, initially, about 10 people. About half internal, and half external hires. They were all journalists. I actually had 2 people on the staff back then that had won Pulitzer Prizes, so I outnumbered the newsroom 2 to 1 in Pulitzer winners. We were well positioned in terms of online staffing.

WHY DO YOU THINK YOU HAD THE LEVEL OF FREEDOM AND RESOURCES THAT YOU DID?

Well, we were part of the newsroom, and we were reporting to a guy whose teenage son had discovered Prodigy, and had turned his dad onto Prodigy. And light bulbs went on in the editor’s head when he saw that, and he reported to a guy named Joel Kramer. The two key people here were Tim Maguire, who was the editor of the newspaper, and he’s now down at Arizona on faculty, and Tim was just a forward-thinking person. And Joel Kramer who now runs Minn Post was publisher of the newspaper. Joel had a major responsibility for strategic rethinking for the entire corporation and had just led this process where he actually took a leave of absence for a year and reconsidered the business we were in. And it
resulted in a complete redesign of all the internal responsibility structures within the newspaper. This generated a lot of press in the industry at the time. So were just, genetically, the company was open to new ideas. We were aggressive about looking for alternative distribution systems and technologies. We were into delivering alternative products; the newspapers delivery system was delivery national magazines door to door. We were rethinking at a very elemental basis what business we were in, and trying to make the most of our assets. So in that context, when someone like Joel or Tim looked at the Internet...and I have to say at first it wasn’t the Internet, it was just online. When they looked at the online world growing rapidly, they thought it was really critically important that we get in there and learn. So when we dove into this, it was with an intent of building a serious business, but it was with the expectation that we would make a whole lot of mistakes, and whatever we did was going to turn out to be wrong, but we knew that we had to fail forward, and in a learning way. So we expected to be able to get in, learn, probably undo what we had initially did, and then redo it. That was in the expectations at the very beginning. And that’s probably the most important asset we had, in the entire process, was a willingness to learn from our own failures and adjust.

SO IT SOUNDS LIKE WITH A REGARD TO A GRAND IDEA OR VISION, YOU DIDN’T REALLY HAVE ONE SET BECAUSE YOU KNEW IT WOULD BE PERMEABLE?

Well there were actually a lot of grand ideas, and some of them that newspaper companies today are just now figuring out. The whole notion that the online arena is a real time continuous publication cycle was obvious to all of us from day one. So we didn’t operate as an online newspaper with editions. We were real time updating from day one.

AND THAT WASN’T AN ISSUE AS FAR AS WORKFLOW?

Oh it was definitely an issue. And also from day one we recognized that the online
environment allowed people other than us to publish. So, this is before the Internet, we built an online service that was...that we sold, it was paid access. Back when people used modems, but on our platform, on Star Trib online, we went out and we started recruiting community organizations to publish in their own areas. So we had...I don't remember what they were, but we had civic organizations and churches that were doing community publishing under our umbrella in 94 and 95.

AND HOW MUCH OF AN ISSUE WAS THE DISCUSSION OF PROFITABLITY, AND THE ONLINE PRODUCT NEEDING TO ADD TO THE OVERALL BOTTOM LINE?

It was considered to be a real business from the beginning. Like every else, we had these hockey stick graphs, where we knew it would be off to a slow start, but at some point it would ignite and take off like crazy. What we were trying to do was more of a traditional newspaper revenue model where people were paying for access to the service. So we had reader revenue combined with advertising revenue. Within 9 months the entire world changed and web technology and the Internet suddenly opened up. And we very quickly pivoted, and shut down the paid service, moved all of it to the Internet and chased a pure advertising model. But in all cases, we were absolutely focused on figuring out a way to make this profitable. It was not going to be an add-on or some sort of peripheral to the newspaper. The plan was for it to be the future.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE ISSUE OF CANNIBALIZING THE PRINT PRODUCT, PARTICULARLY SINCE YOU WERE UPDATING 24/7?

Well there were people who felt threatened by it. There are always people in every organization that want to protect the past. Certainly not on the online team. We had varying levels of success working with people in the traditional newsroom, but we had very, very powerful leadership from both the top and the middle giving strong direction
that there were certain policies and procedures to be followed with news, and getting it online was an organic part of the project. And literally, before we launched...this is a Star Trib way of doing things, they like to have meetings, they like to have everything planned out beforehand, they like to have policies, written before they do things...so we wrote a policy. And the policy was very simple. It was: for any story that was breaking, and a story that we did not dig up an invent through our own investigations, it’s happening, the information behind the story is generally in the public domain, and we know enough about it to answer the 5 W’s, the basics, and we’re confident in our knowledge, there is an expectation that the reported is going to write it immediately, and turn in the basics immediately, and we’ll get that online as quickly as we can process it. So with that policy in place, and supported by the editor, and the metro editor, and the assistant city editors, it becomes pretty clear to the reports that that’s what’s going to happen. And the other thing we did...we put one of our online people, the online operation was physically separated, but we had one of our staffers that sat in the newsroom and was responsible for making this happen. Which might involve arm-twisting, or it might involve taking dictation and doing a rewrite. And Jackie Crosby, who did that, was one of our people that we hired externally. She had a broadcast background, but she had won a Pulitzer Prize as a print reported. And she had a lot of credibility that came out of that, and she had the sense of immediacy that broadcasting has, and she was able to make this happen. We were always in an extremely competitive market up there, and this is where the Internet broadcasting corporation got its start too. And we were always competitive with and usually ahead of the broadcast media in terms of breaking story online.

DO YOU THINK THE LEVEL OF SUPPORT AND RECEPTIVENESS YOU RECEIVED WITHIN THE NEWSROOM BROKE DOWN BY AGE, OR BY DEPARTMENT?
Well older people tend to be less flexible than younger people, but that’s just a tendency. There were some older people who were on top of it. But as time went on we had some weird thing happen. Where say, people that did get the Internet were not particularly interested with us or our own product. And I’ll point an unfair finger at one of them here, it was James Lileks. He does a lot of work with the website today. But Lileks is a humorist and a columnist, and he was more interested in building his own brand independently with his own website than he was in working with us. So sometimes the things that keep people from collaborating are just exactly the opposite of what you think they’re going to be, because this guy really go it. Sports guys tended to be difficult to work with, because honestly, if they were there and they were engaged, it was because they were on deadline and they were slammed. But the news folks were generally pretty good about getting information to us, and the existence on the online staff of very well credentialed professionals as opposed to a bunch of young HTML geeks made a big difference.

WAS THERE ANY CONSULTING OF OUTSIDE LITERATURE OR KNOWLEDGE ON THE MEDIUM OR ON INNOVATION? YOU'RE UNDERSTANDING OF THE INTERACTIVE NATURE OF THE MEDIUM, WHERE DOES THAT COME FROM?

It was really us figuring things out. I personally benefitted from a lot of conversations with other people in the industry, and we had conferences from day one. I started going to serious media conferences in 84 and 85. Actually, immediately got on the speakers circuits, but I also learned as much as I gave in those contexts. So we’d hear people like Howard Rheingold talk about things like community building. All of which made sense to me, because I didn’t approach this fundamentally as a publishing medium. I approached the online medium as a community because that’s what I’d been doing with it for 10 years.
THAT SEEMS TO BE A PRETTY UNIQUE UNDERSTANDING FOR THAT TIME, CORRECT?

I think it is. Most of us are sort of trapped by Maslow’s hammer. If the only tool you have is a hammer, everything is a nail. So people from the newspaper business tended to, and for a decade and a half continued to repeat this process of coming to the Internet and saying this is just another distribution channel for our really great journalism that we will continue to do the way we have always done it. And it’s clearly not that. But you have to break your head on the rocks a little bit before you get it through your head. I didn’t have that problem because I had been writing code and participating in online discussions for a long, long time, but had they put someone else in that position, I think the Star Trib would’ve looked like pretty much every other online newspaper operation.

DO YOU THINK THAT IF THE ATTITUDE AND INSIGHT YOU POSSESSED HAD BEEN MORE WIDESPREAD ACROSS THE INDUSTRY THINGS WOULD’VE DEVELOPED DIFFERENTLY WITH REGARD TO READERSHIP AND PROFITS, OR WITHOUT A DIFFERENT BUSINESS MODEL DO YOU THINK IT WOULDN’T HAVE MADE MUCH OF A DIFFERENCE?

Well the initial dream was to have a significant chuck of reader revenue, and that was blown away by the web rather quickly. And at that point, when we moved to the web, the classified department got real excited about it. And we were able to build a significant revenue stream building directories, and things like that. You know how Google has the street view function? We had something similar to that in our real estate directory in the 1990s. The Star Trib was a very unusual place to work. We were able experiment with a lot of forward thinking ideas. And then the McClatchy Company bought us in 1999, and that brought in new management and new leadership and everything honestly kind of slowed down or stopped. It became tentative, sort of a “what are you guys doing, what do you want.” So I left about that time. I can’t really comment on how things went after that.
Howard Finberg – Interview conducted on July 15, 2011

BIO

I was at the Arizona Republic in Phoenix Newspapers, which was the parent company of the Arizona Republic.

AND WHAT WAS YOUR ROLE THERE AT THAT TIME?

At that point, at the Republic I was senior editor for information technology.

AND WHEN DID THAT PUBLICATION FIRST HAVE A PRODUCT ONLINE?

Well, our first product was in 94, and shortly thereafter, later 94, early 95. In 92 we had a product called Home Buyers Choice, which was a BBS system. It was a magazine, and it was a fax product. I think we transitioned it in 94, when we launched on the web. And we shortly thereafter launched on AOL.

AND HOW IT RECEIVED IN THE NEWSROOM WITH REGARD TO HAVING TO USE THE TECHNOLOGY AND SPEND TIME WITH THE SYSTEM?

Well at that point we did not have systems where reporters to handle the content. The technology did not allow reporters to do very much in terms of putting content online. It was sort of a two-step process, where the reporters would do what the reporters were going to do for the paper. And then the online producers would go in to the newspaper system, pull those files out, and make them for AOL or the web or both.

SO SINCE THEY WERE NOT HAVING TO DO ANYTHING DIFFERENTLY, DID THEY STILL HAVE ANY SORT OF RESISTANCE TO THE IDEA OF CONTENT BEING PUT ONLINE FOR FREE, OR A LEVEL OF EXCITEMENT?

I think reporters like to have their content in as many places as possible. It was always the executive discussions around what should be free and what should be paid. Now if you do your history you’ll know that back when we started with AOL it was not free. AOL was
charging a per minute cost. And they shared that revenue with us, and that was a fairly
lucrative deal for us.

WAS IT DIFFICULT TO SECURE RESOURCES FOR THE PROJECT, OR WAS UPPER
MANAGEMENT FAIRLY DEDICATED TOWARD IT?

They were dedicated toward it. Maybe not as dedicated as I would like every moment of
every day, but I was fortunate to be at an organization that understood that the world was
changing, and put significant amount of resources into the development aspects of our
online presence.

AND HOW MUCH OF AN ISSUE WAS PROFITABILITY, DID IT NEED TO TURN PROFIT
QUICKLY OR WERE YOU GIVEN MORE OF A LEASH?

We had a longer runway than some organizations. But the other part of that, and you
haven’t asked the question of what we put online, we never put the entire newspaper
online until much, much later. Our goal was to find focused content that advertisers would
support so we did not cannibalize the newspaper just to put it up online. So we had other
products in there. And we were able to actually generate revenue fairly quickly.

AND WERE THOSE OTHER PRODUCTS?

Well, obviously buying a house. Houses, cars, apartments. Golf. Sports. Things that had
passion around them.

AND WAS THAT JUST A MATTER OR ASSESSING WHAT YOU THOUGHT THE MEDIUM
OFFERED OR WAS THERE ANY SORT OF MARKET RESEARCH, PARTICULARLY THE GOLF
LISTINGS IDEA?

Well, on the medium for the market. Remember we’re in central Arizona. So what do you
do in Arizona? You play golf. You can play golf in Arizona 12 months a year if you’re willing
to put up with the heat. If you don’t want to put up with the heat you can play 9 months a
year. So golf was a good fit for us. So things like that. And that was driven by market
research, but it was also driven by looking around and seeing: what could we offer as an organization and a media company, where do we go pull our strengths, and offer something to the public that is not a repurposing of what we were already giving them in another form.

AND AT WHAT POINT DID IT BECOME MORE THAN THAT, AND PUTTING A LOT OF THE PRINT CONTENT UP ONLINE?

I would say that once we transitioned to a new computer system, 98 maybe.

AND AT THAT POINT IS IT LESS OF A 2-STEP PROCESS, WHERE REPORTERS ARE TAKING MORE OF A RESPONSIBILITY FOR MANIPULATING THE CONTENT ONLINE?

Well, reporters never could manipulate the content online. I mean that’s...they could file, or the copy editors could file, or it would automatically file when it was edited for the paper.

BUT AS FAR AS NEEDING TO REWRITE A HEADLINE, OR THAT SORT OF THING...

That’s what producers do. That’s why you have producers.

AND DO YOU IDENTIFY AT ALL WITH ANY SORT OF PUSHBACK WITHIN THE NEWSROOM?

I would say that there was always...I wouldn’t say pushback was the issue. I would say that understanding the full potential of what was happening was one of the challenges that we faced. It’s one thing to say pushback as in, no; I’m not going to do something. It’s another thing when you get pushback in the way that, someone that could help us do some more than what was published in the paper. Could they bring back a document or could they get extra photos, or could they take a tape recorder and record and audio feed. That was a slower process to educate the newsroom about the potential of what could be done. Some of them got it, and some of them didn’t. But pushback is necessarily the word I would use.

AND AS FAR AS SOME GOT IT, SOME DIDN’T...DID YOU FEEL THAT BROKE DOWN MY AGE OR STATUS LEVEL, OR MAYBE DEPARTMENT OF THE PAPER AT ALL?
That’s a long time ago to try to make me make that generalization. I’m not sure. Frankly, in my experiences, I don’t think age was the issue. I’ve run across younger people who did not get it, who did not want to get it. And I’ve come across older people who totally embraced it and wanted to go forward.

**HOW ABOUT MARKETING VS. EDITORIAL OR SALES AND AD VS. PRODUCTION TYPE CONFLICTS?**

Well I would say the people who had the hardest time getting it were the advertising people. Especially classified. It was a battle to get done what we wanted to get done, and we wanted to do more.

**AND YOU SPOKE ABOUT EARLY ON NOT WANTING TO JUST REPURPOSE THE PRINT PRODUCT...IN LATER YEARS WAS THERE ANY SORT OF CLEAR VISION FOR WHAT YOU WANTED THE ONLINE PRODUCT TO BE, AS DIFFERENT FROM THE PAPER OR MORE OF A UNIONIFICATION?**

It’s still different.

**BECAUSE OF WHAT IS OFFERED ONLINE?**

Yeah, if you’d go look at the site. A lot of the things offered on AZ Central have nothing to do with the newspaper.
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT EMAIL
Dear potential research participant,

My name is Jake Kemp and I am a journalism graduate student. I am requesting your participation in a research study that seeks to gain an understanding of how large newspapers deal with potentially disruptive technologies. The primary focus of the research will be the initial foray into the digital medium. This study will seek to gain knowledge on how media managers view potentially disruptive innovations, and how perceptions about embracing new technologies may have changed over the years. You will be asked to answer questions about your time in a managerial position at a large metropolitan newspaper. The questions will focus on the decisions you made, or were involved in on some level, with regard to the consideration of launching a new product based on a technological innovation. This will take about 25 to 30 minutes of your time, and the interviews will be recorded. Your name will not be published in the study.

Please respond via email indicating whether or not you would like to participate in the study and when would work best for you. The principal investigator of the study is Dr. Tracy Everbach. She can be reached at everbach@unt.edu.

Thank you for your time,

Jake Kemp
REFERENCES


Nguyen, An. (2008). Facing "the fabulous monster": The traditional media’s fear-driven innovation culture in the development of online news. *Journalism Studies, 9*(1), 91-103


