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REINVENTING THE NEWSPAPER IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Recently, I strayed into the bedroom of a 21-year-old strawberry blonde called Jennifer. Let me clarify that it was just a virtual visit—lest my wife, who is here, worry.

Jennifer has placed a camera in her bedroom which takes pictures almost nonstop and transmits them to her Jennicam Web site every ten minutes. The Web site shows Jennifer reading, sleeping, changing her clothes, playing with her cat.

There is nothing extraordinary about these pictures. Yet to me, Jenni in the bedroom has become a metaphor of the infinite possibilities of publishing in the digital age. It also exposes us to the moral dangers of the Internet.

Nicholas Negroponte, founder of the Media Lab at the Massachussets Institute of Technology (M.I.T.), foresaw exciting possibilities. He said, "As the business world globalises and the Internet grows, we will start to see a seamless digital workplace." Bits will be borderless, stored and manipulated with absolutely no respect to geographical boundaries. In fact, time zones will play a bigger role in our digital future than trade zones. Negroponte's vision has become a part of our everyday lives.

Digital is not the Internet—though this is a common misconception. We have digital telephones, television, computers, compact discs, audiotapes, scanners etc. Eventually every analog device will be digital. Most people have no idea what digital is—only that it is better.

It was a rude awakening for newspapers when the Internet brought breaking news on our screens in a matter of minutes. If news can be delivered in real time what purpose does a newspaper serve?
The digital revolution has added to the worries of the newspaper industry. Drop in circulation and advertising revenues, and volatile newsprint prices have forced consolidation and closures.

But the digital world offers us numerous advantages. With high-speed data transmission we can have real-time satellite printing units. Digital cameras have already won us over. Now an Omnicam developed by a Columbia University professor allows us to take pictures on hostile territory. It shoots with the lens pointing away from the target.

Coming back to Jennifer, she is no journalist or publisher. She is just another fresh economics graduate from Pennsylvania University who lives alone in a rented apartment in Washington, D.C. Yet she is making an impact with her wordless photo essays. And she knows her economics. The three-year-old Jennicam site draws 500,000 visitors a day and has made Jennifer Ringley a celebrity. It won't be long before Jennicam starts attracting advertisers.

Like Jennifer, anyone with an innovative mind and an Internet connection can become an online publisher and lure away readers and advertisers from conventional news vendors like us.

They don't have to spend huge sums on offices and printing presses, or on building brand image. The Jennicam generation has everything on the digital platter. All they have to do is think up a slightly new idea or give an old one a wacky spin, and send it winking through the Web.

The Web search engine, Yahoo, for instance was started by two undergraduate students at Stanford University two years ago. Today, Yahoo is a vibrant universe offering hard news, stock quotes, free advertising services and addictive chat forums, besides hypertext links to countless sites in cyber space.

The Web has been expanding as if in a multiple Big Bang and it is unlikely to shrink and collapse—at least not in my time. Four years ago there were fifty sites on the Web. Now 1.5 million new Web pages are created every day. Each popular Web site will eventually mean fewer readers and less advertising revenue for traditional newspapers.
People of the Jennicam generation are happy reading news on the Web rather than ink-stain their fingers holding bulky broadsheets. The Web quickly gives them news and information of their interest, in the order of their preference. Newspapers test their patience compelling them to wade through volumes of verbiage.

Till a few years ago newspapers faced serious competition from radio, television and magazines. Wire services were neutral in this media war but now they are highly combative on the Web. Having put up with an invisible, disembodied existence for long, they are revelling in their new-found shape and form, and advertising revenue. Radio and television networks and magazines also have pitched camp on the Web. NBC, the American television network, has launched a Web site which contains transcripts of popular shows and news information.

It is not just the Jennicam generation and fellow purveyors of news that are posing a challenge to newspapers. News sources of journalists are themselves offering an alternative to newspapers. Government organisations, political parties, universities, research centres, corporate houses, celebrities and even subversives have their own Web sites. One need not go through a newspaper for authentic information on a particular organisation or event. Those on the Web can well sideline a middleman in the information business.

Cheaper personal computers and faster Internet access increase the challenge. Computers will soon be as affordable as television sets. A school in Manchester receives the Internet via electric power lines, rather than through telephone network. The link is ten times faster and there is no time wasted on waiting for dial-up. The system was developed by Northern Telecom and Norweb Communications for United Utilities, which supplies power in Manchester, U.K.

Consolidation will change the publishing industry. I won’t be surprised when United Utilities offers electricity, satellite television, Internet access and a telephone—everything on a single connection.

A growing concern among newspapers is the inability to gauge how far the online medium represents a threat. I believe that online either represents an opportunity for newspapers to live forever, probably in a different form, or spells doom for them. I am still unable to figure whether there will be a middle ground.
To me the newspaper is portable, touchable, and visually aesthetic. One can tuck it under the arm and take it to the park to read, or roll it up to swat a persistent fly. Or one can simply savour the creative layout. But how does a newspaper adapt to change in the digital era?

From an Editor and owner's point of view, newspapers have to maintain the right balance among three strategic activities—attacking competitors' revenue streams, aggressively defending or cannibalizing their own, and laying the ground work for new markets. Boundaries are not collapsing, but they are being reshaped.

I believe that newspapers with quality content will thrive if they adopt multiple modes of distribution of the digital age.

The prime driver in the digital world for a newspaper will be increased consumer demand, which in turn drives electronic classifieds. Newspapers with a well-established classifieds section has the advantage of a wide readership. This success can be replicated on the Internet to keep at bay upstarts and television networks. Adding the ability to search and browse with complementary information is a distinct advantage.

There is no single formula for success. The New York Times is a free service on the Internet, while the Wall Street Journal personalizes information but charges a fee. Newspapers can also act as database vendors.

The real advantage of a newspaper is in its brand name and credibility, which help it influence readers through on-site promotion. One can foresee online editions having links to catalogue and home shopping.

The Career Path site, jointly launched by major American newspapers, offers 200,000 free job listings a week. Taken from member newspapers like the Washington Post and Chicago Tribune, these listings serve as an incentive to advertise in the printed paper.

To add advertising value, newspapers should invest in technology to provide interactive advertising to the consumer. We should be in a position to offer 3D images, video, text and sound. Companies are extremely demanding while placing their advertising dollars.
Newspapers have a cost advantage on the Internet since they already have an information infrastructure. But the real strengths of a newspaper are its unique content, distribution capability and loyal readership.

Structurally, newspapers have to build flexible organisations where timing is the critical issue in establishing strategic alliances. These alliances will help cross-promote the brand to a larger market.

Repositioning of products becomes imperative in the digital age. Television and the Internet hold an aesthetic appeal, and newspapers will have to use better newsprint to keep pace with them. Newsprint manufacturers will have to cut prices, at least for their own survival.

Though most newspapers have launched online editions, many of us have stopped with a mere presence on the Web. We think that we can wait a while before we waltz with the digital.

Waiting may prove costly. As the former Massachusetts University president Michael Hooker says in 'Come The Millennium'.

Let me quote Hooker: "The challenge for you will be perhaps your greatest ever. As a producer of newspapers, what you must do first is determine how you conceive yourself. Are you an organisation that supplies newspapers or are you an organisation that supplies information? Remington and Underwood saw themselves as being in the typewriter business. IBM saw itself as being in the word-processing business. The rest is history." So, this is a pivotal moment in our existence.

That is a chilling reminder. If newspapers do not rush to embrace change, we will become dry fossils in the near future where the earth is blanketed by hundreds of low-orbit communication satellites. These satellites will effect a wireless technological spring in every sphere of human activity and transform the way we gather and deliver news. The successful newspapers of the future will be the ones that ride the new technology with ease.
Traditional newspapers have been in the business of supplying news. Or, at least we insist what we supply is news. In the digital age newspapers will have to find new tools for gathering and delivering news, information and database. There will surely be takers for each of these categories exclusively.

The mode of delivery will be varied. Every successful paper will reach a reader the way he wants it, and when he wants it. And even those who don't want it—which I guess is what 'push technology' is all about.

The successful paper would reach the reader via the Internet or interactive television, computer screen-savers or e-mail inbox, fax or cell-phones, personal digital assistants or electronic tablets. It will also reach the reader as CD-ROM, audiotext or video on demand, and as special editions for those can't see or hear. And to those who still grope for the physical feel, it could be hand-delivered as the hard copy we have always lived with.

Several publications like Newsweek already have CD-ROM editions. The Knight Ridder company, which owns the Philadelphia Inquirer, is working on making the electronic tablet easy to use for newspaper readers. One can download a newspaper into the tablet, which is portable, and read at leisure.

Knight Ridder invested U.S $32 million last year to develop 32 Web sites, but, they generated only U.S. $11 million in revenue. The Internet is still in its infancy as far as making money is concerned. But newspapers should be prepared to invest if they have to compete with start-ups who splurge initially.

Malayala Manorama, the paper I edit, has sixty-five editions including an online version that Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, inaugurated last year at our office in Cochin, India. After a few years in the digital age, we will probably have to put out thousands of editions a day. No two readers of ours agree on a thing—especially with their Editor.

I wouldn't be surprised if the paper goes polyglot. At present it is published in the Malayalam language from Kerala. Millions of second and third generation Malayalis living outside Kerala do not read Malayalam. Publish the paper in the language they understand—and we catch them by their cultural roots.
Polyglot editions will also help us become the global gateway to India on the Internet. Anyone who wants know anything about my country would then click into www.malayalamanorama.com

Building a gateway involves forging strategic alliances, just as Boston Globe has shown with the Web site Boston.com. The Globe has got together all major players in Boston, including rival newspapers. We need friends in a world that has progressed from ink to link.

Past the gateway, we need to build virtual cities. They had better be more useful than the minor marvels like Microsoft Sidewalk or America Online's Digital Cities. We have to build Online Communities of our readers, help them set up their free home pages on our site, and offer them every service that does not hurt us. Those who play together, stay together.

The Chicago Tribune, which was voted the best online paper last year, offers a community publishing system to schools, sports clubs, and civic and professional groups. Besides building audience, this facilitates exchange of information between the groups and the newspaper.

Tools of news gathering and dissemination will be digital in the new age. So too the newsroom, allowing all the staff to work from home. Diligence will become digital, is my forecast.

But, there are a few things that should not change. One is good writing—the art of telling a story. The digital age will probably revel in hypertext journalism where every underlined word will take the reader deeper and deeper into the story. All papers can do it. But the reader will choose the one that tells the story best.

The other precious constant is credibility. It gets us readers, it gets us revenue. It is our life breath. We have to guard it with all our might at a time when the publishing world is rapidly changing. The pseudonymous Jennicam generation may reinvent everything else. But try reinventing credibility!

Thank you.