

A new Internet news site

By Ron Buel/10/2009

Most major cities in America now have a stand-alone Internet news site that attempts to emulate online what a metropolitan daily newspaper does. Many of these sites have been built as a result of the closure of daily newspapers, or as a result of a vacuum in coverage caused by major cutbacks like those our own The Oregonian is enduring.

Typically, these sites are financed with foundation grants, with individual subscriptions, and with on-line advertising revenue. My own research reveals that seldom does the online advertising revenue provide more than 25% of total revenues. The competition for online advertising revenue comes from many different sources.

Portland is not without its own online news sites today, and it seems unrealistic to expect all of them to fade away under new competition from a news site run by our non-profit. Most prominent is Oregon Live, The Oregonian's poorly organized but content-rich website. It is clear from internal memos that The Oregonian is planning to develop and buttress its website with a great deal of additional attention from remaining Oregonian reporters and staffers. The Oregonian sees an opportunity to emphasize what it calls "hyper-local" websites within the city and outside it in the suburbs, and this is clearly one direction aimed at building the site's eyeballs.

The websites of Willamette Week, the Portland Mercury and the Portland Tribune, all of which are used by these publications to break news daily for these weeklies, are worthy of our consideration. In addition, Oregon Public Broadcasting has an engaging website that not only carries breaking news from the Associated Press, but also the expanding enterprise audio reporting from its radio broadcast team. The TV news websites carry video that, like their local news programs, is heavy on weather, sports, mayhem and fluff.

There is also <http://www.portlandsentinel.com>. That's the online presence of the hyper-local North Portland newspaper of the same name. In addition, there is <http://theportlander.com>. This is a new online-only news site that's about 50% aggregated content and 50% original reporting and blogging.

It is worth noting that the websites of the local newspapers are much less expensive to operate than to print, truck and deliver newspapers on dead trees. It is also worth noting that the generations who desire to spread their newspapers out before them every morning, rather than going online for their news, are aging and dying off. The younger generations – the millenials and Gen-Exers – rely on the World Wide Web, of course.

There are two very different approaches that our Internet news site could take. The one which this writer favors is that taken by thevoiceofsandiego.org which is spelled out at great length in another piece. That approach is to look for gaps in coverage, and to do investigative reporting that garners results, to find the important stories that other news organizations are not finding.

Not to be dismissed lightly, however, is the more common approach of MinnPost.org, whose leader Joel Kramer is working in Minneapolis with an editorial staff and budget about the same size as that of thevoiceofsandiego.org. Kramer notes that his Internet news site has chosen to seek more hits with short stories, rather than focusing on investigative reporting. He notes that the research shows that short stories produce more eyeballs and drive up Internet advertising revenues. “My drive is to not to downgrade enterprise and investigative reporting,” Kramer says, “but to get our nine-person staff to write frequently, to produce more material for our site, and to build their individual followings and voices in so doing.”