

“The Integrated Newsroom:  
the changing face <phase> of  
news journalism as we know it”

© **Nisar Keshvani** <nisar@keshvani.com>

<http://www.keshvani.com>

Australia: P O Box 12552 Elizabeth Street QLD 4002  
Tel: 61 7 3864 2978 Fax: 61 7 3864 1810 Mobile: 0413 893 258

Singapore: P O Box 850 Robinson Road, Singapore 901650  
Tel: 65 5854 786 Fax: 65 224 2217 Pgr: 9401 9701



Queensland University of Technology

**Nisar Keshvani** recently completed a MA(Research), with the School of Media and Journalism, Queensland University of Technology where he is an online journalism educator. He is editor of fineArt forum (<http://www.fineartforum.org>) a pioneer online art and technology news service, and freelances for various print and online publications.

# The Integrated Newsroom: the changing face <phase> of news journalism as we know it

## - Abstract -

This paper presents the result of a study which sought to gain an understanding of how the World Wide Web (WWW) is shaping today's online news products. It presents three specific players in the online production process: the **product** (the publications – both print and online), the **producer** (journalists and editors) and the **publishers'** management policies. Within this framework, a particular focus of the case study was **the changing work practices within the 'integrated newsroom' environment**.

Two online newspapers namely; *The Age Online* (John Fairfax Holdings Pty Ltd) and *The Straits Times Interactive* (Singapore Press Holdings) were examined. They were launched in 1995 making them pioneers in this new medium at a stage when the commercial use of the Internet was in its infancy. *The Age Online* was the first paper in Australia to go online while *The Straits Times Interactive* was one of the first in Southeast Asia.

The research findings indicate that the online news industry is fast-paced, fresh issues are developing rapidly and new media is in its infant stages with its potential impact yet to be fully realised. Current trends indicate a need for younger multi-skilled journalists who are often technically inclined; increased deadline pressures; an emphasis on better content management software and the need to gratify technology-savvy online audiences.

Industry trends to note are: the shift from "news publisher" to "information content provider" mentality, the quest for profit-making on the WWW, an increasing interest in investing in new media businesses, innovative methods of online delivery, and Wireless Application Protocol and XML's (extensible mark-up language) potential to revolutionise news delivery and production.

## 1. An Introduction to the Digital Landscape

Buckbobbill is a geek of the first order, who each day intrepidly climbs upon his spaceship, jets off to probe the inner workings of the high command at Galactic Central, and writes it up in HTML to file it via e-mail.

They (the journalists) see his [Buckbobbill's] coming as either the downfall of [the] free press or the heaven-sent salvation of a dying medium.

- Leah Gentry, *Los Angeles Times* (in Harper 1998, p.48)

Twenty-first century digital journalist Buckbobbill, a cross between Buck Rogers, Bob Woodward, and Bill Gates could simply be just another futuristic image we come across in a Hollywood science fiction film, a comic book, or television series, but the questions and concerns Buckbobbill raises are urgent ones for journalism. The central question of this paper is not whether there is any truth in the Buckbobbill model, rather it seeks to go some way towards understanding what the World Wide Web's impact on the newsroom and journalistic work practices and how news organisations can take advantage of what it offers. It specifically examines two newspapers, The Singapore Straits Times and The Melbourne Age.

Gentry rejects the Buckbobbill paradigm and insists that journalists should instead embrace traditional news values. She argues that the myth of the “new media geek, who has no formal print experience and who writes computer code in his sleep, scares off many who would otherwise aggressively pursue an exciting new journalistic forum”. She says this fear is unfounded and a study of media evolution will reveal radio and TV journalists took time to discover the strength of their media to tell stories and the WWW faces a similar challenge (*ibid*).

Roger Fidler (1997, p.23), an internationally recognised electronic publishing visionary and pioneer, supports this view and coined the term ‘mediamorphosis’ to describe the evolution within the communication media:

Mediamorphosis is not so much a theory as it is a unified way of thinking about the technological evolution of communication media .... By studying the communication system as a whole, we will see that new media do not arise spontaneously and independently - they emerge gradually from the metamorphosis of old media.... Established forms of communication media *must* change in response to the emergence of a new medium - their only other option is to die.

Today’s news publishers are in the early stages of this evolution and are straying away from their traditional role of delivering ink-on-trees news, and are beginning to see themselves as ‘information content providers’. It would have been difficult to imagine the print media carrying the content of broadcasters years ago, but today it is common for newspapers to have an online spin off with audio and/or video features. This media *convergence* is a key vision articulated by Nicholas Negroponte, Director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Media Lab, which accurately depicts the changes we are witnessing in the communications media today. He popularised the idea that diverse technologies and forms of media are coming together as one. Negroponte recognised this in 1979, and predicted that “all communication technologies are suffering a joint metamorphosis, which can only be understood properly if treated as a single subject” (*ibid* p.25).

**Interactivity, individualisation and convergence** are three buzzwords, almost synonymous with any discussion related to online journalism. These terms appear in various forms in a number of studies (Aikat 1998; Harper 1998; Kees 1999 & Singer 1997). Deuze (1999, p.377 - 379) combines these key elements in his analysis of the skills and standards required in an online environment. He describes **interactivity** as a purely audience-related feature that is an essential element of any news site, and concludes that direct contact with readers can result in more story ideas, correction of factual mistakes and access to sources which otherwise would be too time costly to locate. **Individualisation** is the ability to organise a web site to cater to the audiences’ needs in the form of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ content. With ‘pull’ delivery, the site is grouped by content, hyper-linked to a searchable archive and consumer-related services. ‘Push’ content on the other hand, gives the reader the ability to customise what they want to read either online or delivered via e-mail. The third key word **convergence** is the amalgamation of moving images, text and sound in a single online story. It is slightly different from television journalism, in that the user has the option to decide which aspects of the story to begin with.

Deuze's definition of convergence which relates to utilising various media forms online should not be confused with Negroponte's convergence of media industries as explained earlier.

These studies observe the paradigm shift from traditional journalism to online journalism and the changing work practices of journalists. However, on a wider context it is important to note the current industry trend of alliances between telecommunications companies, Internet start-ups, media organisations, and computer industry leaders that could potentially cause an industry shake-up. In January 2000, America Online and Time Warner announced their merger and their acquiring of EMI, a music giant. Industry analysts fear that such media concentration could undermine freedom of expression and because most users still turn to a few news sources, most websites would not be able to match the power and reach of the single AOL-Time Warner (Powell 2000).

The lines between a traditional print and broadcast journalist are diminishing just as the media landscape is being constantly re-mapped. This phenomena ties in with Fidler's (1997 p.105) survival principle which forewarns the possible outcomes of the digital revolution we are facing. He says that though all forms of media will always evolve and adapt in response to changing conditions, it should not be assumed that individual forms can successfully adapt and evolve forever. Most, like living species, will be subsumed or die out but the process normally takes time and does not occur the instant a new form emerges.

### **2.1 Case Study 1: The Age Online (Melbourne)**

#### **Publisher: John Fairfax Holdings Pty Ltd**

John Fairfax Holdings Pty Ltd, publishers of *The Age* for 145 years, carry a number of other newspapers and magazines establishing it as the major media player in Australia after News Ltd and PBL. In 1999, Fairfax recorded a 61 per cent net profit increase of A\$180.27 million compared with 1998, the highest since it re-listed in 1992. Compared to the 1998, *Fairfax Online's* losses increased from A\$4 million to A\$20 million in a cash flow of A\$300 million. (*Morrison*, 9 September 1999, p.9; Fairfax Online 1999). This indicates that expenditure on the online editions of Fairfax Pty Ltd outstripped the revenue generated by banner advertising and access income.

Fairfax CEO Fred Hilmer in an interview with *Business Sunday's* Michael Pascoe (12 September 1999) defending Fairfax's Internet losses said:

... it's an important bet [the Internet] for us, it gives us a chance to get into a new medium that I believe, over time will go [grow] and what we're trying to do in the Internet is build a number of different platforms that hang off our content and that make sense, and that gives us a shot at making some money as this medium matures.

Hilmer described three revenue models for the Internet and said there are ways to generate revenue and "what we've got to do is try". Traditional advertising is one model and Hilmer explored the idea of transaction-based advertising suggesting a move away from the conventional "fixed basis"

model popularly used by publishers. Instead he suggests sharing the advertiser's risk and charging a transaction fee based on the number of products or services sold as a result of web advertising. Developing a web directory of merchant (electronic commerce) websites based on Fairfax's Big Colour Pages and sold.com.au, an auction site are the other two revenue models (*ibid*).

Besides its core publishing business, Fairfax has strategically invested in related publishing and multi-media services since 1995. It formed two new divisions, Fairfax Digital Media and Fairfax Productions to manage its new investments. Fairfax acquired Australian Geographic, Australian Information Media (a Pay-TV service), established Big Hand Asia Pacific (an interactive software joint venture), AUSINET (an online information service), and bought a 50 per cent stake in Artist Services, a leading television production company to complement AAV, Fairfax's audio-visual production arm. Its then CEO, Stephen Mullohand justified the company's diversification:

Newspapers will remain the single most important source of in-depth information into the next century. But media consumption habits are changing. Over time, CD-ROM, audio text, Pay-TV, telephony, online and interactive services will carry an increasing share of information to consumers. Our participation in this evolution will enable Fairfax to broaden its market franchise and increase frequency of contact with customers.

(*Fairfax Annual Report - Chief Executive's Report 1995, p.9*)

## **2.2 The birth and growth of *The Age Online***

*The Age Online* (<http://www.theage.com.au>) was officially launched in April 1995. The launch of *The Age Online* was in fact initiated by the then Library Manager, Sybille Norais with assistance from Frank Prayn (current Library Manager). In conversation with Prayn on 7 September 1999, he recalled its development:

It was in 1994 that Sybille was looking at online services to see what was available out there. In those days, we had to connect to Compuserve and AOL as they were the only service providers. In early 1995, she was looking at getting a site up and running and managed to get some server space from Vicnet. We became the first paper online, though it didn't have much content or graphics and was terribly slow. The Internet has grown tremendously since and at that time I had no idea it would be this big, I visioned it to be more a tool for libraries and offices.

Upon the successful implementation of a preliminary online paper, it was moved to an in-house server from the VicNet server. Mary Riekert (currently with *Fairfax Online*), a journalist with prior WWW experience, former *Age Online* Production Editor was hired in March 1995 as a casual before joining full-time to set up a 'fuller' version of the online newspaper.

While I was teaching myself HTML and setting up, there was a huge dispute between journalists and the publisher regarding copyright. Journalists were outraged that their copy was reproduced electronically for CD-ROM's and the Web. The law then stated that the initial copyright for publication went to the publisher and thereafter it belonged to the journalist. While that was being sorted out, we set up a news wire type service as a precede[into] to our print edition.

(Riekert pers comm, 7 September 1999)

Leslie Walsh, one of the first two *Age Online* journalists, recalls the Internet launch was a response to market forces. She currently manages *The Age Online*'s live updates section featuring breaking news picked up from wire services.

The paper started as a condensed version of *The Age*. No one in the newsroom was interested in putting it online or working on it. There was this fear of technology, which still exists amongst some older journalists. When I was hired, I didn't know much about HTML and today I don't read the papers anymore because it is old news .... I used to cherish reading the printed version from back to back though.

(Walsh pers comm, 27 August 1999)

While the copyright issue was being resolved, a professional company was hired to design the initial site. Internally, Mary with help from programmers, worked out a direct feed from the desktop publishing system onto the server. At that stage, Mary was promoted to site manager, with two staff working on the main site and another on the classifieds. Since then, Alan Morison, former *Age Online* editor, has overseen a comprehensive redesign and the addition of regular audio coverage from reporters. It has 200,000 site visits and one million-plus page views per week. The site has established a strong presence in online sport by providing updated coverage of AFL football, the Australian cricket World Cup campaign, and grand slam tennis with live text reports, and instant e-mail feedback (Harris 1999).

### **2.3 Physical Setting & Human Resources**

The Age Online team operates from a general work space amidst the other sections of the newspaper. It has a pool of journalists who handle varying tasks from coding web pages, maintaining live updates and sports chat sections (during weekend rugby games), and a technical team. The Age Online team consists of 20 staff, ten of whom are full-timers and a constantly changing pool of ten casual staff. The online newsroom is essentially divided into three sections; the production team, sports live team and technical team.

The production team is largely responsible for transferring content and ensuring a fully functional site goes live on the WWW daily. A night news editor and night sports editor guides the production team from an overall pool of six casual staff. On weekends, a 'sports live' team manages the site's live football and cricket sections. Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) students assist as interns with the production of this section.

In general, Age Online journalists are younger and equipped with IT skills. A sign of the importance Fairfax has placed on its sites is employing Darren Burden as Fairfax's pioneer webmaster. Burden has a business, journalism and IT background and is looking into developing a transparent production system for the various sites. At the time of the study, a new program called *FutureTense*, which transfers material electronically to HTML, was being trialed. *FutureTense* (<http://www.futuretense.com>) requires minimal human resource involvement thus freeing up

journalists to focus on developing content. In a follow-up e-mail (11 Nov 1999), webmaster Darren Burden explains;

It [FutureTense] makes the production of the site less technical from the editorial point-of-view (they don't need to make links) they only need basic HTML like bold and italics. Before they had to open up the indexes and build them by hand ... not any more. All they need to do is make sure the abstracts, headlines, bylines and order of stories are correct.

The implication of this is not yet known. It possibly frees the journalist to concentrate on developing quality content but could result in job losses. On the other hand, the rigidity of a 'template approach' and minimal free play during the designing and page production may prove frustrating to journalists.

#### **2.4 Online Journalist's Professional Practice**

At *The Age*, the Internet has influenced the role of the journalist and there was initially a resistance to the WWW. Riekert (pers comm, 7 September 1999) explained:

Initially the WWW was virtually unknown. When I told people I managed websites for a living, they went, 'What?' The newsroom was very against us and the copyright issue didn't help it. I was seen as this crazy person and explained my work to those who were interested and that required patience. Today you see URLs everywhere and it has become part of our lives. When we showed journalists' their copy online, they got such a buzz. I recall a meeting with a senior editor to decide what we should put online, and he told me blankly, "My worry is one day, I won't have a job because we won't have a newspaper."

However Riekert added that this attitude is slowly changing and related a recent experience.

I was at the Budget lockup in Canberra with a senior deputy editor as part of *The Age's* online coverage. It ended at 7.30pm and by 7.33pm, with a click of the submit button we had our 12 stories online. For the first time, he understood the immediacy of the WWW, and its power as a medium and from then things began to change editorially.

(*ibid*)

Riekert (pers comm, 7 September 1999) feels that though additional skills are required, the deadline pressure is intensified and there is a need to be more productive. She said that there are no 'real' deadlines online, as it continuously rolls, making it similar to print. "Basically the pressure is to get it right in as short as possible a time. The real pressure won't come until competition with other online products intensifies."

While producing the online edition on 21 August 1999, Sam Verghese, a casual production staff with extensive subediting experience said there are three major differences between print and online journalism:

- It is the ability to make changes with ease even after the information has been uploaded,
- The journalists' access to a wide range of information

- This requires the journalist to be extra cautious of the content he/she puts online.

## **2.5 Online Consumer's Expectations**

The expectations of readers or the online consumer have increased over time but Riekert said it would not remove the role of news organisations.

There is so much information on the Net that there will always be a role for the news organisation to sift through and pick up information. There are heaps of papers but people just buy one because they like the feel and attitude of the newspaper and how it is presented.

(Riekert pers comm, 7 September 1999)

Morison (pers comm, 31 Aug 1999) agreed and said it is crucial to form a good impression in the minds of readers and establish their liking for an online product in the early stages. He explained that,

Most users go through half a dozen sites, and it is important to understand their needs and capture attention early on while they are forming their online news habits. A reasonable portion of our readers are young and what we provide is a slicker, sports-car style version of our paper with the highlights so that our print readership is not compromised.

Riekert (pers comm, 7 September 1999) said that keeping their target readership in mind when developing their sites has always been a priority.

We need to keep our readers in mind and sometimes this becomes a handicap. Readers use different systems and software to browse so we target for the middle 50 per cent in terms of user capabilities. The top 25 per cent normally use the latest software whereas the bottom 25 per cent are slightly behind. This way we get maximum reach. We do use Alt tags for accommodate the visually impaired and we tend to steer away from Java.

She added that audiences are getting more sophisticated and more demanding leaving the onus on the publisher to cater to the needs of its readers.

As audiences are accustomed to the web, a section of early adopters want and begin to expect more. They want news on their Palm Pilots and through WAP [wireless application protocol which allows content delivery via mobile phones]. As a information company we have to keep up. In fact, the technology in which information will be delivered in 2005 hasn't even been developed yet

*(ibid)*

Morison (pers comm, 31 August 1999) explains it is important to understand the information needs of readers. Compared to the print edition, the Internet's immediate nature provides a distinct advantage when it comes to news coverage and is definitely not restricted by geography. Readers who are interested in a local event, can access important news even though they are stationed in any other part of the world.



## **2.6 Management Policy**

Since its inception, there has been a push for original content on *The Age Online*. Fairfax's focus has been on maximising quality content and repackaging news, information and classified content from its various publications through specifically targeted web sites. Morison (pers comm, 31 August 1999) feels that though the online paper may undermine print circulation by up to 10 per cent, it continues to be an important medium.

The WWW as a complete extension and combination of radio, television, print, is fully interactive and is likely to become a fourth medium. It has the ability to deliver information when readers want it. An online presence is important, if not more important and is a reinforcement of the print product. Alliances need to be formed to ensure better services and though there will be initial resistance to its acceptance, natural pressure will win the day.

Morison added that the website could well become a content guide of what readers can expect in the print edition or vice versa. McDonald (pers comm, 12 November 1999) expands this vision further when he said:

Ultimately, the online news product will evolve through the day. In the morning, it begins by looking very much like the print edition. Through the day, it changes and evolves with new content and latest news. Towards the end of the day, it looks very different and the cycle begins again. I believe this is what will soon happen on *The Age Online* (and others as well).

Recently there has been a strategy of developing vertical portals. Vertical portals include individual 'supersites' with a depth of content targeted towards a niche market. Drive.com.au, mycareer.com.au, itjobs.com.au and sold.com.au are examples of this recent move. Production Editor, Dan Fahy (pers comm, 20 August 1999) said:

We have been introducing vertical content portals such as Drive.com, Sold.com and Itjobs.com. They are e-commerce related sites which provide specific information as added value to our readers. One way we generate revenue is by billing vendors a click-thru rate and in turn our readers benefit by getting a discount on any purchases made.

McDonald (pers comm, 12 November 1999) adds that "advertising does not drive content, although feedback from readership could well do so." In the digital domain, branding has become a crucial issue. Riekert (pers comm, 7 September 1999) explains that a newspaper's masthead is very important.

Brand names are important. Fairfax is very concerned about diluting their brand identity. The Age is distinctly Melbourne and our mastheads have very, very strong identities, a Fairfax news site would mean nothing to people so it is important to leverage on our brands.

Within a news organisation various factors play a role in the implementation and success of an online newspaper. Fairfax has a clear interest in new media and has invested heavily in new

technology and set up a separate entity, F2 to concentrate on this. The online newsroom is undergoing a number of changes including the implementation of new technology and software which promises to free the journalist to concentrate on producing quality content. The roles of various players in the process, from the news organisation to the journalist, editor right down to the consumer have changed and been redefined with the convergence of new media.

### **3.1 Case Study 2: The Straits Times Interactive**

#### **Publisher - Singapore Press Holdings**

*The Straits Times Interactive* (STI) is the WWW version of Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) broadsheet flagship publication, *The Straits Times*. It was first published on July 15, 1845, and is the most widely read newspaper in Singapore. Weekday circulation is around 391,649 with a readership of 1.7 million (SPH Online 1999). *The Straits Times* strives to be an authoritative provider of news and views, with a special focus on Singapore and the Asian region.

In 1999, SPH reported a group profit (before tax) of S\$421.7 million, 7.2 per cent higher than 1998. SPH captured 49 per cent of Singapore's S\$1.27 billion advertising share market from 1997 - 1998. AsiaOne, SPH's online news portal, secured approximately S\$1 million in advertising revenue (SPH Annual Report 1998, p.4 - 21), but the cost of going online was not reported. The company has a diverse range of business interests ranging from property to film and video post-production, telecommunications, multimedia, as well as providing Internet and cable television services. SPH's strategy since 1995 has been to establish itself on the information superhighway. It began by developing an Internet presence for its core newspapers through AsiaOne, launching Singapore's third ISP, CyberWay and operating MobileOne, a local mobile and paging network. SPH then acquired a 20 per cent stake in Singapore CableVision, the only local cable service (SPH Annual Report 1995, p.3).

In 1999, SPH sold its share of Cyberway and successfully acquired the licence to operate the Republic's fourth ISP - DataOne (Asia). SPH and Keppel Telecommunications & Transportation jointly own DataOne and their long-term plan includes acquiring ISP licences in Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand. The two groups are shareholders in MobileOne, therefore project customers will be able to get on to the Web via handphones soon (*The Business Times*, 8 June 1999).

SPH's most aggressive move yet, is the incorporation of a wholly owned subsidiary, AsiaOne Internet Pty Ltd to handle all its Internet ventures. AsiaOne took over SPH's Multimedia division. Its authorised and paid-up capital have increased from S\$100,000 and S\$2 to S\$100 million and S\$10 million respectively, establishing AsiaOne as an independently run company.

It is evident that SPH is a well-established media player, and invested heavily in new technology and recognises the need to gain a stake in the lucrative new media pie. It has relied on a

cost-effective entry point into the technology market by developing and 'owning' rather than relying on third-party firms for technological support. Through its investments it can provide consumers with additional services, work out bandwidth uncertainties, and experiment with interactive means of new presentations.

### **3.2 AsiaOne - the website**

AsiaOne (<http://www.asia1.com.sg>), SPH's website was launched in 1995 with a web portal strategy, long before the term was commonly used. It acts as a gateway for SPH's products and services. Additional services include web hosting, development and consultation services targeted to private enterprises hoping to maximise their online presence. In January 2000, AsiaOne revamped its site and repositioned itself as a "comprehensive portal for news and e-commerce". Besides content from the SPH stable of newspapers and magazines, it launched a range of other services and features including classified advertising, auctions, job opportunities, financial services, data services, e-shopping, free e-mail and various lifestyle sites (Velloor 1999). This move is in line with current industry practice which dictates that offering such services goes a long way towards attracting 'eyeballs' (online readership), thus creating a loyal consumer base and profits. This also indicates SPH's strategy to develop quality content and switch from a 'news publisher' to 'information content provider' mentality.

### **3.3 The birth and growth of Straits Times Interactive**

SPH Executive Chairman Lim Kim San launched the online paper on 30 November 1995, the same day disgraced Barings trader Nick Leeson was brought to trial in Singapore. Leeson single-handedly bankrupted the London merchant bank overnight. STI's pioneer editor Paul Jansen recalls its genesis,

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

(Jansen pers comm, 27 July 1999)

Work on developing the paper began in September and Jansen's aim was to launch the paper later in the year. The team slowly expanded to include staff with specific skills - a backbencher (sub-editor), two IT personnel and a layout artist joined the team. Jansen recalls the days when the team had to learn HTML from scratch (*ibid*).

During Jansen's editorship from 1995 - 1998 (he is currently *Straits Times*' Money Editor), STI experimented with a number of web techniques. On June 7 1996, STI for the first time webcast Senior

Minister Lee Kuan Yew's 'Will there be a Singapore after Lee Kuan Yew?' speech at a Singapore Press Club/Foreign Correspondents Association Lunch at Raffles Hotel.

Other milestones include the first live 'combi' webcast of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's National Day Rally speech. Cleverly avoiding the high bandwidth required for a video webcast, STI transmitted PM Goh's speech live via RealAudio (an audio streaming software), showed pictures as he spoke, and displayed text of his speech as he completed it. There were special sections to landmark important news events such as the Hong Kong handover in 1997, the South-east Asia Games, the launch of Lee Kuan Yew's book, 'Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and his ideas', and the SilkAir plane crash in Indonesia.

### **3.4 Automating the production process**

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

### **3.5 Physical Setting & Human Resources**

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

During the early days of STI, Jansen (pers comm, 27 July 1999) said journalists were required to have three main qualities - "They had to be good journalists, who were interested in this revolutionising new technology, and work efficiently as independent operators". New Media Editor Thomas (pers comm 28 July 1999) who headed SPH's online newspapers, describes the profile of today's online journalists as "web content managers or web masters who have basic HTML skills with a passion for the Web. They need to have the ability to re-package or re-purpose news and create and source information."

When asked if there is a trend to hire IT professionals and train them into becoming journalists. Jansen (pers comm, 27 July 1999) said, 'I don't think it will work. What is happening is you

are confusing the box with the content. Giving pretty boxes doesn't result in good content. From the beginning the idea was always to present good content.'

### **3.6 Online Journalist's Professional Practice**

The professional practice of the online journalist at STI is changing just as rapidly as new media. Jansen (pers comm, 27 July 1999) describes the seven levels any print news story undergoes at the *Straits Times* and how this practice has changed in the online news environment. The seven levels, in this case begins after the journalist returns from the field and is shown here:

- Level 1 - Supervisor assists the journalist in shaping the story based on the outcome of the interview/coverage
- Level 2 - Supervisor looks at the first draft and decides if it is satisfactory
- Level 3 - Copy editor subs the story
- Level 4 - Backbencher (Sub-Editor) decides story placement (eg lead story)
- Level 5 - Team leader checks information, house style and lays it on the pages
- Level 6 - It is sent back to sub's desk for approval.
- Level 7 - Night editor does a final check before the pages go to print.

Jansen explains that before any news story is seen by a reader it progresses through these layers primarily due to the nature of the print medium. In this instance, the journalist is protected by seven sets of eyes. However, on the WWW the layers are drastically removed and a story can be published online with or without a sub-editor or editor's approval and a round of sub-editing. Goh (pers comm, 22 July 1999) explains further:

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

Besides this sense of power, Goh and Koh Su Haw (pers comm, 23 July 1999), Head of Business Times Online feel that there are new pressures facing journalists in this new medium. Goh said that today's online journalists need to be multi-skilled. Besides writing, they keep abreast of technological innovations, and are comfortable with HTML/photo manipulation software.

The role of the online journalist is slowly being understood and *Straits Times* journalists are gaining awareness of the medium and the possibilities it holds. Jansen, however, says that this wasn't always the case:

There was a fear that stories would be stolen and put online before they were printed. We assured section editors exclusive stories wouldn't be stolen until they were printed. We focussed on updates which everyone had access to anyway. Print journalists did initially

wonder how we could upload new stories immediately. Our aim was actually to provide the basics, the major difference is that reporters analyse and interpret information for the print edition, whereas online, we could simply upload new information and announcements in tune with the nature of the WWW.

As the role of the online journalist is slowly gains importance and acceptance, there seems to be an emerging trend towards hiring younger journalists who possess IT expertise and writing skills. It is common knowledge that the number of entry-level mainstream journalism jobs is decreasing. Once employed neo-journalists still require substantial 'on the job' training and experience to become editorial decision-makers. However, the online media has created a new job market, open to younger, less experienced journalists since most professionals in this field lack such skills.

### **3.7 Online Consumer Expectations**

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

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

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

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

### **3.8 Management Policy**

The first three years saw Paul Jansen and his team experimenting with various methods of delivering original content. As mentioned earlier, various senior journalists from the individual newspapers led their online editions. However in 1998, due to various reasons such as refocus in online strategy, SPH decided to form a New Media Unit headed by a single editor, Margaret Thomas (pers comm, 28 July 1999) who managed the four online newspapers. She explained:

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

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

STI's ambitious bid to be a pioneer and quality online newspaper was generally successful but cost overruns and doubling up of resources necessitated a redesign of production and management processes. Its initial efforts to provide original content gave way to straight content transfer but it has reverted to providing novel content once again with the relaunch of its new portal.

#### **4.1 Online Newsroom Trends**

This study broadly examines the challenges facing today's online news publishers and practitioners and, while the two cases cannot be generalised, the developments at The Age Online and STI may be pointers to the future. The unique nature of the WWW and technology has blurred the lines between the individual players as they continue to challenge each other in a bid for success with their WWW ventures.

#### **4.2 Publisher**

It is evident that both Fairfax and SPH are well-established and major media players in their own right. Both have, or are investing, heavily in new technology and recognise the need to gain a stake in the emerging lucrative new media pie. Besides their staple publishing enterprise, both have emphasised multi-media, Internet start-up or telecommunications business interests. In keeping with the increasing expectations of their audiences, and the high costs involved in new technology, both companies are investing in new business interests. Although Fairfax is restricted by Australian law and is unable to invest in telecommunications, it has taken stakes in multi-media and audio-visual production companies. It is an economical means of gaining entry into the technology market as it is cost-effective to develop and "own" rather than rely on third-party firms for technological support. Through these investments, they can provide consumers with additional services, work out bandwidth uncertainties, and experiment with interactive means of news presentation.

Industry trends indicate that new dot.com companies will continue to be born and AOL-Time Warner 'type' mergers will prevail. Although profitability is questionable, major players who fail to ride the WWW bandwagon risk losing their audiences, as can be seen by the jump from 750 online newspapers in 1995 to 4,430 presently (*Editor and Publisher Interactive*). There has been an immense growth in the popularity of web-only publications such as *CNET*, which introduced a new host of competitors for news publishers.

Both newspapers are not threatened by the WWW though they have taken different strategies. *The Age* has grown rapidly since its inception, though *AsiaOne* and *STI* have come full circle. SPH entered the WWW abuzz with innovation, however subsequently decided on a conservative approach from 1997 – 1999. It has however, since January 2000 re-modelled its website and decided to aggressively experiment with news customisation, value-added online services and regular news updates. In the 12 months since the author's research study SPH has made a 360-degree turnaround in its management policy from focussing on basic "print to online" transfers, to producing novel content. This re-positioning of its online new product indicates SPH's keen understanding of this new medium and attempt to mark its foothold on the WWW.

As pointed out by Ledbetter (1999), the 'portal' strategy is popular with American newspapers. Both examined papers have adopted this and strongly believe that quality content beyond news will attract a loyal readership, and with this readership, advertising can be a lucrative source of revenue. Issues such as branding through content quality information, domain names and design are crucial with both papers focussing on creating a solid brand identity for their websites. SPH and Fairfax are experimenting with developing "virtual communities", by offering free e-mail services, web hosting, live chats, news customisation, e-mail updates, online auctions, weather reports, horoscope and search engine capabilities. Current industry practice dictates that offering such services goes a long way towards attracting "eyeballs" (online readership), thus developing a loyal consumer base and profits.

### **4.3 Producer**

Journalistic work practice is evolving, and the WWW is slowly gaining acceptance in the newsroom. In the five years since both online newspapers were launched, journalists are beginning to recognise the WWW as a potential source of information, and the new set of skills required to judge an online source's credibility, WWW-searching skills and producing online content. 'Immersive' storytelling as suggested by Deuze (1999, p.380 - 385), and "multi-skilling" by Jansen, Goh, Koh (SPH) and Morison, Fahy, McDonald (Fairfax) is penetrating the integrated newsroom. Beyond the basic writing, editing and interviewing skills required, journalists of the future will need to be *au fait* with technology, photo manipulation and require basic web skills.

The online journalist's profile has evolved in this new environment. Besides writing, they keep abreast of technological innovations and are comfortable with HTML/photo manipulation and sophisticated software. The integrated newsroom is gradually clearly re-defining online newsroom



roles as staff are hired for specific tasks. Instead new roles in the form of web masters, content managers, web developers are emerging. There is a current boom in the need for content producers as websites realise the importance of fresh and quality content online, however this could be a short-term trend, and may not last. Any prediction in this area, would be premature guesswork.

There is a trend towards hiring younger journalists who possess IT expertise and writing skills. It is common knowledge that the number of entry-level mainstream journalism jobs are decreasing. Once employed neo-journalists still require substantial 'on the job' training and experience to become editorial decision-makers. However, online media have created a new job market, open to younger, less experienced journalists since most professionals in this field lack such skills. SPH's Jansen and Thomas and Fairfax's Riekert are examples of few experienced journalists with the determination and perseverance to pick up HTML and web skills on the job. This trend however may not last, as more fresh graduates begin to enter the industry equipped with such skills.

The traditional journalist's gatekeeper role is changing as well. Online journalists at both papers do recognise this and acknowledge the additional responsibility of their redefined job scope. As highlighted by SPH's Jansen (pers comm, 27 July 1999), the 7 layers formerly present in the print environment have been removed, requiring journalists to be better skilled and adding additional work pressures on the journalist getting the story right the first time. A consolation though is the fact that unlike print media, mistakes can be corrected swiftly online as pointed out by Verghese (*Age Online*).

The deadline pressure an online journalist faces may be intensifying as Riekert (Fairfax) explained. McDonald's (*Age Online*) vision of the online news product evolving through the day beginning identical to the print edition in the morning and looking different by the end of the day may not be far fetched. There could well be a reverse in trend with the print edition turning into a digest or pointer towards a detailed information and news service available online. However as Fidler and Saffo suggest, the medium will continue to evolve in response to challenge and the final form for the WWW has far from set. Some may argue, however that the news wire/radio journalist faces the pressure of producing news stories as frequently as hourly. This argument is not entirely true for the online journalist, as he/she faces the additional challenge of providing news across media (images, sound, text) in line with Negroponte and Deuze's call for convergence and the need to practise "immersive storytelling".

In terms of production, the processes for online and print differ very slightly. At the moment, it requires human resource intervention, and both papers are working to automate the process. A current glitch lies in the transfer of content from the desktop publishing to online systems and there is a need for an individual to rid copy of print commands, finetune HTML coding and locate photographs from their system. Both papers, are working to automate this progress through sophisticated content management software, and with such a system in place it can free their journalists to focus on developing quality content and enriching the user experience through interactivity. Such technology is

being finetuned and will dictate the progress of the online newsroom and the online newspapers adventurous spirit on the WWW. However if successfully implemented, it removes the flexibility in design and could result in a 'template-approach'. On the flipside, this could allow the online production process to be decentralised and dedicated online departments to disappear. Online publishing could be an added task the individual news section handles and may be integrated within the traditional newsroom environment.

#### **4.4 Product**

An area of increasing concern is information design and architecture. While both online newspapers have kept to print design convention and maintained typography basics. Due to the limits of a computer screen, sites are generally designed to a 640 X 480 or 800 X 600 dimension. This will force publishers to provide user-friendly access to news and information within a limited time span and screen constraint. There is a clear danger of overloading information and providing excessive links on a single page.

Publishers must become aware of this evolving domain and strategically plan navigation and site infrastructure. As in television advertising, the information sender has approximately 10 seconds to hook the reader's attention. Archives are a valuable and potential source of revenue which is compatible with the nature of the WWW as a resource. Both papers have search engine capability on their sites, but the Age Online limits its free search to the past four weeks, and STI has a 7-day archive. There is a fee for searching for articles prior to their set time-frames for both online newspapers.

#### **4.5 Audience**

Sophisticated tracking devices and software have been developed in a bid to develop a profile of the online reader, however it is still a challenge. The fact that online readers are no longer restricted by geography, and have diverse interests and preferences indicate that publishers are facing a challenging task ahead. In general online readers are quite sophisticated and are beginning to expect the latest technology such as audio/video streaming, advanced search capabilities, and diverse (and occasionally customised) information.

The popularity of Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) such as the 3Com's Palm Pilot, and similar products such as the Psion and the DaVinci introduce new potential especially when coupled with Wireless Application Protocol (WAP). This technology can cater to the demands of the reader and provide access to bite-sized news and condensed downloadable versions of news sites via PDAs. At the top end of the spectrum, there are technology-savvy readers equipped with the latest gizmos, and at the other end "newbies" recently introduced to the WWW. *Age Online* targets the middle section of the market, and *STI* designs its sites knowing some of its readers do not have the latest WWW browsers. Users' technology limitations influence news publishers as they hesitate to use

the latest plug-ins such as Flash, and other fancy tools for fear their readers will not be able to access their site. Online publishers need to find a balance between providing quality information with compelling design and user access. However, today more than 90 per cent of WWW users worldwide use Netscape or Internet Explorer and above (Statistics.com). As new browser versions, continue to be included without added costs in a PC purchase, such compatibility issues will cease to exist.

The research concludes that although this medium is still in its infancy the trend towards establishing an integrated newsroom is confirmed, and through automation “shovelware” may no longer be the norm. Online news production may be de-centralised and individual newspaper sections may be responsible for transferring their content online. Future journalists will begin their careers equipped with basic WWW skills, and the distinction between an integrated, print, television or radio journalist will blur. The WWW is unlikely to completely replace traditional news formats immediately, however we will continue to witness its evolution.

#### **4.6 Future-casting**

The future of online journalism very much depends on the entire WWW revolution and will be shaped by the way audiences adopt technology as part of their lifestyle. New media will not replace print, radio or television and the market will be redefined. Before TV came about, radio used to air soap operas, thereafter it became a news and music source. Such boundaries and markers will be redefined in the same way that corporations have moved from brochure-ware type of sites to interactive multimedia sites and implemented transactional e-commerce models. There will be a continued focus on personalisation be it in the form of news or any other area and “information content providers” will continue to implement and finetune total e-business. The only certainty lies in the fact that the WWW revolution will continue to evolve.

SPH, Fairfax and other news publishers in the same way will experiment with online news delivery, move away from simple re-purposing of print content to developing extensive “portals”, and personalised mobile news through PDAs. They may be capable of delivering news (not just bites of news) by the hour to individuals customised to their needs, if the potential of WAP can be realised. Publishers will trial different information retrieval systems and search capabilities to capitalise on the archival nature of the WWW, with a view to developing the ideal mix to boost income and profitability.

“Buckbobbill” as Gentry (Harper 1998, p.48) describes may not be a fallacy. Future journalists will carry wireless devices and transmit news stories directly to the server that converts the content and uploads it online. With WML (Wireless markup language) and WAP, content will be written in WML, driven from WAP sites that can be accessed by phones and no longer limit the used to a desktop or physical space. Audiences will be able to surf and request in menu format what kinds of information they want, and this is not limited to news, leading an integrated lifestyle where users

people will read news, trade stocks, order pizza and book a cinema ticket with their phone/PDA. This vision could indeed become reality once bandwidth concerns are resolved.

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