

Navigating the perfect storm Challenges, trends & solutions for web newspapers

Digital Insight Report

March 2009

The global recession accelerated structural change in the readership and advertising markets newspapers serve, creating a perfect storm that threatens the very survival of most newspapers – both on and offline. As the ad revenue shortfalls bite and online newspapers fail to get the same audience growth as internet pureplays, newspaper leadership teams are faced with tough choices. Many fail to monetize those audiences effectively, lacking the models and skills to raise advertising yields and additional revenue streams. It's tempting to cut digital publishing rather than see it as core to future revenue platforms, however the decisions media firms take during the next 18 months will have disproportionate implications on the future of their brands. For some those futures will be painfully short: many newspapers will not survive the recession and its aftermath. After 15 years in the online publishing sector, Digital's team share examples of their strategic insights and practical experience with publishing leadership teams. This Digital Insight Report accompanies in-company strategy programmes for media groups eager to navigate the storm and chart a safe course for blended on and offline publishing.

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Danny has been a researcher and commentator in the digital networked industries since he began managing online news media sites in 1995. As publisher of the UK's first online newspaper, he co-founded the Internet Advertising Bureau in the UK and then Europe before running web publications businesses ranging from mass market portals and consumer magazines, to online retailers, search and email services. He is the author of the Digital Publishing Strategy Academy and has taught digital media for a decade.

“It’s crunch time for newspapers. Changes in audience behaviour, shifts in advertiser thinking and the agility of key competitors undermined the business model news publications were built on. The advertising recession accelerated these impacts to create a perfect storm that threatens the very survival of most newspapers – both on and offline. Navigating the storm is possible, but few media groups steer the right course. During the next three years 10% of Europe’s newspapers will cease trading, many more will go online only and their stock values will tumble. They must embrace radical solutions, today.”

At a glance

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1. Introduction and context

The kids who didn’t read papers are now adults, the role of newspapers in people’s lives has shifted, advertisers are thinking differently and people connect differently. The challenges facing the newspaper industry – both print and online – come from all sides. The only solution is that the product at the heart of the newspaper has to leap forward: radical change will let them become relevant to the information needs of consumers in the digital networked society, and accessible through the channels and techniques that match this new digital behaviour. Only the newspapers who understand this will survive. Newspaper executives across Europe asked us to translate the landscape into identifiable challenges and solutions as part of our strategy programmes for helping them navigate the markets. This Digital Insight Report covers our approach and includes a few practical examples.

2. The perfect storm

2.1 Why this time, the change is different

The changes in consumer behaviour and advertising thinking that emerged in the mainstream during the last five years are neither cyclical nor generational. These are fundamental shifts in the way our economies and societies work. The digital networked society created new ways of interaction, and yet the models of most newspapers – both online and offline – remains heavily grounded in a world where:

- Information was scarce
- Information needed to be packaged and delivered
- Mass markets shared commonality in the content they wanted from this editing process
- The supply of media was restricted
- Advertisers needed these classic media channels to reach their audience
- Advertisers did not have the opportunity to go direct to customers
- The economics of publishing created high barriers to entry for new entrants into the media industry

These changes are neither cyclical nor generational. The only difference between markets is the scale of their impacts so far. Today's media brands service the transition generation as well as digital natives. They are simultaneously spanning the mass of audience that has a completely different behaviour, the increasingly tiny minority of those whose behaviours are unchanged, and the evolving transition generation whose behaviour shifts further with every extra hour on Google and Facebook.

2.2 The ingredients of the perfect storm

Having worked with online publishers for 15 years, we have been tracking the factors changing this landscape. These can be grouped into four areas.

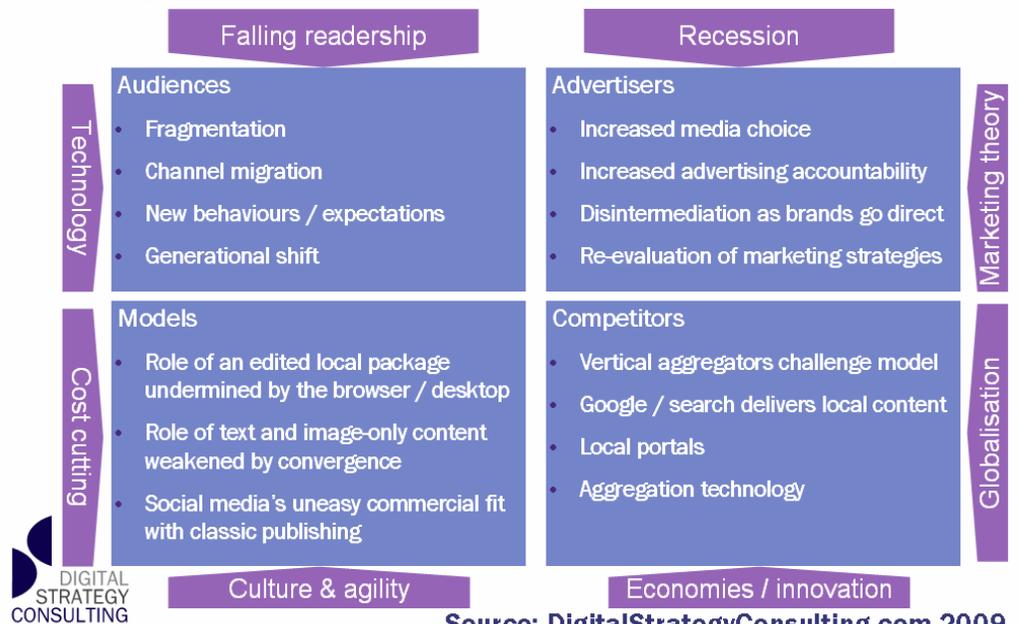
- Audiences
- Advertisers
- Competitors
- Business models

The newspaper content and business model was built on a set of rules which no longer apply. In each of the four areas fundamental shifts have taken place, permanently changing the roles of newspapers, magazines, television, radio and outdoor media.

2.3 Creating the perfect storm

The global recession that triggered a collapse in advertising spend in many countries simply accelerated the inevitable, bringing forwards the effects of those changes and forcing some media groups to confront the need for change earlier. The breadth, depth and length of the recession means few newspapers have the ability to ride out the storm, lacking the financial reserves needed to carry on trading.

The perfect storm: four elements



Source: DigitalStrategyConsulting.com 2009

The challenges newspapers face stem from fundamental change in:

- The nature of information
- Marketing theory
- Consumer technology
- Media experience
- Social networks
- Cultural identity
- Consumer expectations

That's why the traditional content models and business models – of those from the Web 1.0 era of online media – lack relevance and will eventually fail.

3. A few examples of changes to tackle

3.1 Time: Frequency of the publishing model needs to change

This is one of the first challenges online media faced and many took steps to address it. As early as 1997, the team I worked with at Telegraph.co.uk began squaring up to rolling news and real-time publishing.

In the digital networked society

- 'Daily' replaced by immediacy: Consumers expect fresh content now rather than access now to stale content
- 'Pushed and packaged' replaced by on-demand
- Society fractures into more diverse cycles of daily life from the predictable 9-5 habits of the 1970's, breaking the habit of morning newspaper readership

Strategic decisions

Collectively this demands that news and content publishers face a series of strategic decisions. If they embrace these, then the relevancy of their content and business continues in the eyes of the reader. This creates the potential for mass audiences, which in turn drives the advertising model.

- Switch the publishing model to rolling content publication
- Move to 'platform neutral' publishing, embracing online toolkits from Kindle to Twitter
- Re-engage audiences with the media brand at new times and new places

3.2 Geography: The changing role of local identity in culture

The local press is particularly at risk. For local community publishers the advertising collapse is amplified and their teams lack the leadership to develop new content models.

The importance of 'local' has faded. Lives are geographically more flexible, labour is more mobile, and thanks to the web, social connections defy geography. The role of identity through tribes rather than locales has swollen, and digital tools – from email to Facebook – have unlocked ways people can maintain a presence in multiple tribes. New market entrants in the online media space have gained leverage over local content, and in key verticals - such as

motoring, recruitment, real estate and the auctions market – those new entrants have local windows into national databases, providing an economy of scale the newspaper industry failed to build.

Strategic decisions

Collectively this demands that news and content publishers decide which verticals they will focus on and make a series of strategic decisions. As media groups rather than single titles they can still embrace these, although increasingly this will mean working with competitors rather than in isolation. The tough emotional decision will be to step back from market sectors the print title once owned and accept they can no longer play in that space.

- Lever local content across large regions
- Focus on verticals and relationship marketing
- Extend local brand equity across new platforms

3.3 Hyper local content and ads: The iGoogle effect

Media brands need to accept the new information ecosystem and work within that framework. This means understanding the roles of Google in driving search traffic, nurturing the role of aggregators as a way to build connections with audiences and actively rebuilding the content products to live and prosper within this ecosystem. Most newspapers and magazines still need to extensively refocus their editorial and advertising strategies.

Strategic decisions

- Build a strategy around Google, not against it
- Invest in content and the architecture of discussion for the communities the publisher serves
- Create platforms, not words: nurture engagement and give the community a voice for their own content rather than creating the majority centrally



Online resources to support this report

www.DigitalStrategyConsulting.com/publishers
www.DigitalTrainingAcademy.com/publishingstrategyclassroom

To support publishers in our strategy development programmes there are extensive online resources, a few of which are available without passwords in the publishing sector of Digital's websites.



The screenshot shows the Telegraph.co.uk website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Home', 'News', 'Sport', 'Business', 'Travel', 'Arts/Features', and 'Spector Tapes'. Below this is a large headline: 'Tories block open inquiry on MPs' cash'. A video player is embedded on the page, showing a red background with a white 'T' logo. Below the video player, there's a list of news items with their durations and file sizes:

- "Murder on their mind," says Spector attorney • 1 mins 30 secs • 4.5MB • 26/04/2007
- Yeltsin's funeral • 1 mins 52 secs • 5.8MB • 25/04/2007
- Justice Ministry: Judges' revolt • 4 mins 24 secs • 2MB • 26/04/2007
- PMQs: Leak gibe riles Blair • 3 mins 9 secs • 1.5MB • 25/04/2007
- New planet discovery • 1 mins 32 secs • 4.5MB • 25/04/2007
- Diana coroner: Surprise decision • 3 mins 57 secs • 3.6MB • 24/04/2007
- Somalia: No help after US disaster • 5 mins 17 secs • 2.4MB • 25/04/2007
- Junior doctor's damning verdict on NHS debate • 3 mins 45 secs • 1.7MB • 24/04/2007
- Diana coroner steps down • 1 mins 29 secs • 4.5MB • 24/04/2007
- Shock over Blackman verdict • 1 mins 34 secs • 5MB • 24/04/2007

Below the video player, there's a section titled 'New planet discovery' with a sub-headline: 'Astronomers have found a planet on which conditions are the most conducive for extraterrestrial life of any so far discovered.'

The UK's first online newspaper

Edition 1 from November 1994 and a page from the 2007 relaunch that delivered television content from their in-house studio. The evolution of The Telegraph is typical of the changing models publishers need to embrace to maintain the relevancy to their readers and the cut-through needed in a web landscape dominated by convergence.

3.4 The package: Lacking relevancy

Newspapers and magazines draw together content from a diverse catchment, judging what's relevant and interesting and packaging it together in a way their audiences can digest and enjoy. The editing process was essential in a time when people didn't have direct access to that information, but now that the barriers to information access have melted away, the need for this packaging and the nature of what is needed have both changed.

The package of the newspaper lacks relevancy for many people. The web and broadcast media have taken ownership of breaking news, interests in passions and hobbies can be satisfied more readily by niche content websites and consumer magazines, and the activity of daily packaging has been eroded by the approaches of iGoogle and aggregator platforms that provide self selection tools with the benefit of a global economy of scale.

The role of aggregation shifts to the web, and increasingly consumers have become the editors of their own 'Daily Me' by using the tools to select their own RSS feed and data blocks in a way made effortless by portals like Yahoo, MSN and social networks like Facebook. These new players aggregate more efficiently than newspapers and the limitless choice of granular feeds of data gives consumers the chance to weave together their own personal portals for the start of each day. Ten years ago traditional media started to move towards this space with their personalised editions, but few innovated far enough to provide a viable alternative to the portal's software platforms.

Strategic decisions

In this landscape, the choice for newspapers and magazines is how to maintain their distribution and position the carefully edited package as something consumers can trust, respect and enjoy.

- Rebuild the relevancy, focussing on topics defensible in the medium term
- Embrace multi-digital platform publishing with the website as one of many different digital access points to the content ...from Twitter to Kindle actively broaden the touchpoints
- Syndicate content aggressively across all digital platforms that match target audiences, advertising the brand and helping maintain awareness in people's media map
- Approach the web by thinking webspace rather than website; taking content to consumers rather than driving traffic to newspaper sites

3.5 Local disintermediation

Local audiences outranked by other dotcoms

For the local press, having a monopoly of local audiences had been guaranteed. This was a foundation stone for the business and one that has now been broken.

A web browser is a newsstand of a thousand titles and 'local' audiences can be as easily reached and targeted through national or global sites as they ever could through local media. IP/geo targeting is finally unlocking granular local communities for marketers using display advertising online, just as local search is providing a new type of geographical relevancy in listings. Add to this the location tools that transform mobile handsets into geographically smart computers, and it's clear that newspapers have to fight for their relevancy.

Many of these models deliver local audiences to brands while circumventing local media. Alarming for the local media sector this should still be seen as the starting point of this trend. Further imminent changes will come with the mainstreaming of new generation mobile phone devices and the unlocking of greater intelligence about the web browser through behavioural targeting 'super-networks' that use ISP data to build a perfect picture of each and every view and click.

Strategic decisions

Local media need to simultaneously reshape their content strategy and boost their audience

- Review the content strategy and build a content model which is sustainable for meeting audience interests in the medium term
- Create content relevant to the advertising markets and look for new types of connections into the sales processes of key advertisers
- Focus on traffic growth strategies to build audience numbers to make them viable

3.6 Tackle the traffic problem: Prioritise a leap in sustainable traffic

For the local press, having a monopoly of local audiences had been guaranteed. This was a foundation stone for the business and one that has now been broken.

This is, in part, a numbers game. There are many more variables in the online publishing business model, but traffic is a consistent weak spot for most online news media sites. The audiences their sites have to find to compete with in the new landscape may need to be ten or more times greater than the current traffic levels and doing a little more of the same won't in any way get the brands where they need to be.

Strategic decisions

Online newspapers need to achieve a quantum leap in audience levels and have paid a heavy price for under-investing in their marketing over the past decade. The solutions need to be top-down from here on.

- Prioritise traffic growth as a strategic corporate goal, setting key performance indicators (KPIs) for granular aspects of the business's growth



Digital Social Media Academy
Connecting intimately with consumers
Harnessing social media, consumer generated content, social networking and 'Web 2.0' trends

Blogs and online communities are just some of the ways to harness social media and user generated content. The audience of social media has created new publishing and marketing techniques. These are many more publishing tools for getting the most from 100% within your online audience. In this Web 2.0 workshop, we start thinking about the practical side of how to harness social networking and collective intelligence to give your website increased traffic and an editorial edge. We explore different types of UGC and provide practical hints and tips on how brands and website publishers can make their content more easily discoverable to help their audience.

Social media strategies for monetisation
Digital social media commercial strategies
Although social media can transform audience levels, few publishers apply it effectively and even if audiences leap, few succeed in monetizing them effectively. These strategies create a shift in discussion and dialogue within the audience and boost revenues by finding the right monetization strategy for the brand. The risks of harnessing social media are reduced and the benefits amplified.



Digital Marketing Academy
It's all about marketing
Marketing concepts and planning

The world of marketing is changing and to understand the potential of digital marketing techniques you need appreciate the wider picture and trends in the industry. In this lecture we examine some of the main trends within the marketing industry, and we then consolidate them to explain how gradually online offerings are perfect solutions to the marketer's challenge of getting close to the customer, building engagement and delivering sales.

Building audiences to your websites
Digital marketing strategy development
Which tactics will really boost audiences? And which will boost them cost-effectively? We show you how you can instantly drive more traffic and how those customers can be locked into relationship marketing programmes to bring them back. Our framework creates a marketing strategy and plan for content and promotions that works for budgets of all sizes.



Digital Relationship Marketing Academy
Turning strangers into acquaintances, acquaintances into friends and friends into high value consumers.

Digital channels give marketers the chance to build meaningful relationships with identified high value consumers. They create a valuable resource in online media that can drive higher sales efficiencies and greater affinity for consumer acquisition and retention. Relationship marketing is one of the most of all high value consumer strategies and in this academy we explore some of the many products and challenges to using digital channels to create an CRM programme that changes the way businesses work.

Designing effective email publications
Digital email publishing strategies
An intensive programme to transform email editions into vibrant high energy publications. Our consultants coach on the theory of email newsletter publishing, campaign creation and testing. We work with your teams to build strong design that creates greater click-throughs, plan campaigns that build data profiles, and research the content your audiences want as well as creating monetization models for immediate use.



Digital Search Academy
Getting to grips with search engine marketing

Getting your products found online can be like asking your customers to find the proverbial needle in the haystack. Search engines are key to your business and our one-day operation gives you all the basics you need to get started in effective search engine advertising and marketing. It concentrates on the essential knowledge you need to get a framework for the future and delivers practical tips your company can use straight away.

Boosting traffic from search engines
Digital search marketing strategies for media groups
These practical strategies instantly boost free traffic to your sites and show editorial, publishing and marketing teams the workflow and publishing processes they need to create sustainable leaps in audience acquisition. Applying search engine optimization and interface strategy, the team develop and implement a plan that instantly raises audience levels.

- Build a senior leadership team of stakeholders from editorial, marketing advertising and technology to drive the strategy: focus on business agility and team structures that champion rapid prototyping and testing of ideas
- Audience acquisition: Get the basics of advanced search engine optimisation right and rebuild business processes and publishing workflow around SEO
- Take audience acquisition further, building out rich and integrated acquisition strategies that go far beyond optimising content for search
- In parallel develop reader retention strategies that combine publishing with relationship management, content tagging and audience profiling

3.7 Embracing social media

Media sites need to embrace audience participation and social media as a way to boost content and traffic. Get the models right and the audience growth rate shifts, permanently. Fail to innovate the model, and growth continues only slowly. The difference over a year can be dramatic, and between media properties that do and don't use social media tools, this difference readily translates into a clear decision for advertisers.

While Facebook, Wikipedia and MySpace may be synonymous with social media, they only reflect a few ways consumer participation can be harnessed. Social media includes:

- Ratings and voting
- Consumer generated content: text
- Consumer generated content: images
- Consumer generated content: video
- Consumer generated content: audio
- Consumer generated content: knowledge (the wiki model)
- People who like this, also like this... (the individual behaviour profiling model)
- 'Most popular content': top for traffic, blogging, posting (the collective behavior tracking model)
- Advanced user generated content (social media applications)
- Mash-ups that combine content together

Strategic decisions

For media brands, the steps forward are sequential:

- Architect participation by creating frameworks communities can actively take part in
- Market the social media, focusing on distribution and discoverability
- Nurture contributors: Build relationship marketing strategies around star posters, using the Digital Strategy model of content development in social media
- Reduce audience churn by building loyalty and repeat use behaviour with the web publication

3.8 Integration: Weaving content, community and commerce together

In this paper we touch upon just a few of the ways we've helped media groups develop stronger online businesses to support business migration. Transition from one set of economic and publishing models to the next is traumatic for any firm, and today's recessionary advertising market compounds the problems.

That's why the process demands top down leadership and an integration of people and visions from across the business: content, community and commerce need to be woven together to create the right strategy for the business.

Strategic decisions

- Unify project leadership teams around vertical content sectors and publishing goals in key areas such as news, property, motors etc
- Build intensive strategies for boosting traffic and audiences for each vertical sector
- Create content as a heart for community discussions to build audiences, and create stronger monetisation strategies for capitalising on this advertiser appeal
- Build platforms for communities to link together, facilitating engagement and driving discussion
- Develop processes that use integrated teams around key projects and encourage rapid prototyping of content, tools and applications to satisfy known consumer needs
- Task cross functional teams with building strong traffic acquisition and retention strategies

4 Reflections

In this report we highlighted just a few of the challenges the online footprints of classic media face. For executives in the middle of this perfect storm the prospects look grim and the climate around them feels deeply uncomfortable. But there are ways to navigate successfully through the chaos.

A successful and diverse media industry is a key component for a healthy society. The internet has unlocked limitless access to content of every shade imaginable. At a time when the fringes of politics are radicalizing, the web provides the fuel for any philosophical extreme.

News and reporting are only one aspect of the role media groups play, but the importance of journalistic integrity is just as true online as in print, and the role of news providers as guardians of democracy is true irrespective of the platforms they use to publish. The digital networked society needs a plurality of informed voices to help structure the exceptionally noisy debate as every member of society gains the tools to publish.

Solid digital strategies and monetization models are at the heart of successful publishing, and without them neither print nor multi-channel publishers can navigate this storm. In an increasingly globalised culture, local online media can become a centre of gravity for local communities, driving social cohesion the way their printed parents did two generations before. As media strategists, our beliefs are that businesses can still make that transformation, no matter how difficult and frustrating it may feel for managers locked inside less flexible media groups. The perfect storm in the newspaper industry does not have one single conclusion for newspaper publishers, instead it offers a choice and for those that are ready to adapt and accelerate this is far from the end of the road for media brands.

5 How we support media executives

Our consultants have been leaders in online publishing since the mid 90s. For over a decade Digital Strategy Consulting has specialised in accelerating publishers through this transition to produce powerful online media businesses that build relevance in the eyes of their audiences and new revenue streams from their advertisers. There are a range of strategy solutions for quickly uncovering the right models and answers to the different challenges each publisher faces, as well as training programmes for equipping their operational and management teams with the right skills to build and monetize content, community and commercial opportunities.

We have worked in thirty countries, and for some of the largest newspapers, broadcasters and portals in the world. Among the most popular strategy solutions are:

- Strategy healthchecks and risk analysis
- Traffic-building strategies
- Content and community strategies
- Product development strategies
- Ad revenue strategies
- Leadership coaching days

Continuing the conversation?



To find out how we could help your team accelerate the firm and navigate the storm, simply ask us.

Email the author of this report directly:
Danny@DigitalStrategyConsulting.com

Digital Training Academy coaching programmes

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“I’ve been in digital for many years, but the Digital Training Academy you ran for our senior management has transformed this company. Congratulations.”

Media company board director and participant, in-company Digital Training Academy programme

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Our publishing strategy programmes

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- Customer acquisition strategies
- Content strategy development
- Traffic generation strategies
- Training & Coaching

To find out how can we help your team achieve more and your brand gain the edge, get in touch today.



Making sense of a digital world

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This is not
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