

Going Web-First at *The Christian Science Monitor*: A Three-Part Study of Change¹

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This article is a case study of *The Christian Science Monitor's* move to a Web-first publication after the close of its print daily. We focus on three key points in the change process, which we observed through field visits to the newsroom: the first visit occurred before the switch to Web-first, the second visit just a few months afterward, and the third and final visit a few months after the introduction of a new content management system. Our goal was twofold: first, to understand what it meant to these journalists to go through such a change, and second, to understand the impact of the change on journalistic and organizational values.

The Christian Science Monitor is the United States' largest nonprofit daily newspaper. Before it went to a Web-first, print weekly format, it had a nationwide circulation of 43,000. At the time, its Web traffic generated 5 million visits monthly; this figure, as of 2011, remained stable, with a total of 25 million pageviews each month (Groves & Brown, 2011). The *Monitor* announced that it would become a Web-first paper on October 28, 2008, setting off waves of discussion throughout the news industry (Clifford, 2008; Slattery, 2008). As *BusinessWeek* writer John Fine (2008) noted, *The Monitor* would be, by far, the most prominent U.S. newspaper to no longer have a print daily.

We sought to find out what it meant for journalists at *The Christian Science Monitor* to plunge headfirst into a Web-first newsroom. We also wanted to learn what might happen to the news values at *The Monitor* in a 24/7 Web world. We visited *The Monitor* three times: before the newsroom's transition to Web-first; a few months after the transition; and after a new content management system was implemented, one designed to make Web-first publishing easier. We found that *The Monitor* was a place of innovation and change. However, when we left the newsroom, we found that change had unwelcome

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consequences in the eyes of many journalists, who felt news production was now unduly focused on Web traffic.

The Monitor is a key site for a case study because of its rich history and established U.S. and international reputation. As such, it might be seen as a standard-bearer for how prominent U.S. news organizations should go forward in their own Web-first efforts. Like the *Ann Arbor Times* and the *Wisconsin Capital Times*, other American newspapers that have also gone Web-first, *The Monitor* has kept a print product. *The Monitor's* weekend magazine helps to satisfy the longtime core readership of Christian Scientists who were accustomed to the print product. In addition, the magazine also gives journalists a chance to do long feature stories that are ill-suited to the Web format, which is now mostly devoted to shorter-length stories. Though the Finnish financial news outlet *Taloussanommat* may have been the first traditional newspaper to make a dramatic shift to Web-only, *The Monitor* is the first major general interest U.S. paper to transition to a Web-only daily.

Generally, the reaction from news organizations under financial strain has not been to get rid of print editions (though see Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009). Print is regarded as the money maker. However, more and more newspapers are thinking about monetizing their online content as the print business model declines. Search engine optimization and Web metrics are increasingly part of newsroom Web strategy (Anderson, 2011; Usher, 2010). *The Monitor's* experience with Web traffic offers some important warnings for other news organizations, as Groves and Brown (2011) also suggest.

More generally, our research contributes to the literature about transforming newsrooms. We see the impact of the Web-first model on journalists' perceptions of news values, their workflow, and, on a deeper level, their roles as journalists. We hope to offer some insights about how to think about the pressures facing other newsrooms dealing with rapid change and difficult economic conditions.

Theory and Review

Organizational change scholars have looked at the impact of new technology in organizations. In perhaps the most significant qualitative study, Barley (1986) looked at how CAT scan machines were introduced in two different hospitals. In another key study, Orlikowski (2000) examined how the Lotus Notes software program was adapted by three different organizations. Each study demonstrates that people need to incorporate technology into their daily work practice and professional identity for real change to occur. Organizations must also be open to reorienting traditional practices and hierarchies in order for new technology to become a seamless part of organizational culture. Though these studies were not about journalism, their conclusions offer guidance for understanding the challenges facing journalists adapting to a Web-first newsroom.

This study aims to contribute to literature that focuses on the implications of new technology in newsrooms. It seems imperative, however, to set a baseline against which change can be evaluated by offering a discussion of studies from media sociology *before* the advent of the Web. Breed (1955) highlighted the pressure of organizational socialization on journalists as an explanation for why they make the decisions that they do. White's (1950) work on gatekeeping, which launched an entire subset of

literature, elucidated the patterns and processes behind news selection. The now-classic news ethnographies of the 1960s–1980s identified a number of constraining factors to help explain news routines.

Perhaps the most influential of these ethnographers, Gans (1979), suggested that news production is influenced by internal pressures (organizational socialization, time and scheduling, economic pressures) and external pressures (source pressure, audiences). Tuchman (1973, 1980) focused on how journalists order their practices to “routinize the unexpected,” as a means to ensure a steady flow of news content. Schlesinger’s (1978) account of the BBC introduced the term “stopwatch journalism” to explain how time pressure influenced journalists’ editorial choices.

Fishman (1980) and Sigal (1973) discussed how source pressure constrains reporting, illuminating the relationship that exists between journalists and their sources. Epstein (1973) provided an in-depth account of how market forces and perceptions of the audience influenced newswork at CBS news. And even in oppositional newsrooms (Eliasoph, 1988), the same kind of constraints facing news were found to apply, from time constraints to source pressure. The trope of newswork as a factory, with routines patterned according to an assembly line, remains remarkably consistent throughout these texts.

For the most part, the underlying claims about news routines still order newswork. However, today, traditional technology can no longer keep pace with the kind of content demanded in the Web world (Powers, 2011), prompting the need for another look at news production. Recognition of the many changes in the Web world has prompted a “second wave” (Cottle, 2000, 2007) of news ethnographies and news production studies.

Singer (2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2008), for example, looks extensively at the implications of new technology through the lenses of journalistic authority and convergence. Her work shows that journalists adapt to changing ideals of what it means to do their work when they feel invested in the change process. In addition, she illustrates that news organizations can move through change processes by way of a “diffusion of innovation model,” suggesting that change need not always be disruptive.

Boczkowski (2004, 2010) considers change from the perspective of how journalists use new technology to create new practices and work routines. The results are sometimes for the worse, as the new routines may favor producing homogenized content. In his more recent work, he argues that journalists see change as disruptive and threatening—an assault on their traditional notions of what it means to do good journalism. Klinenberg’s (2005) “news cyclone” offers a similarly negative finding about how journalists have dealt with a sped-up news cycle. Not only did journalists report feeling overwhelmed and unable to keep up with the demands of a multi-platform environment, but they also felt their work was undervalued. Both scholars suggest that change has undermined journalistic authority.

Other scholars have found mixed results with regard to experimentation and journalistic authority. Anderson (2010, in press) found that both the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News* were willing to embrace change, but also that the changes which stuck were ones journalists could see as having a direct impact on newsroom practice, and potentially, newsroom survival. Studies of

international newsrooms, however, have suggested there is a greater willingness and appetite abroad to both engage new technology and incorporate it as part of work practices. In a British newsroom, for example, Thurman and Lupton (2008) found an encouraging tale of journalists embracing the idea of multimedia storytelling and convergence; these journalists welcomed new tasks with a more expansive view of their professional identity.

In a series of papers, Wardle and Williams in 2010, and Williams, Wardle and Wahl-Jorgenson in 2011, examined how the BBC has institutionalized user-generated content into its work routines. While the practice became “normalized” to news routines, the BBC is largely portrayed as an organization willing to experiment with new ways of including audience feedback. Similarly, the international studies in the two collected volumes edited by Domingo and Paterson (2008, 2011) suggest openness toward a more fluid notion of journalistic practice. The thrust of the studies included in these collections, as well as the other studies mentioned, suggest that a myriad of factors will influence change: the survive-or-die mentality of the newsroom, the adaptability of journalists to new technology, the communication practices of the newsroom, the organizational culture of the newsroom, and the professional identity of journalists in the newsroom.

A few studies of newsrooms that have gone Web-first offer some points of departure for this work. Thurman and Myllylahti (2009) explored both the business model and editorial practice of a Finnish newsroom that went from print to online—a case similar to ours. They drew the important conclusion that journalists had become aware of Web metrics and felt concerned about letting audience demand influence content. Robinson (2011), using both organization communication theory and news production analysis, examined the *Wisconsin Capital Times* as it also went through the change to Web-first. She extends insights from Deuze (2008) and Domingo (2008) regarding the nature of change to argue that we should look to how journalists are experiencing change and not impose our own theories on such change.

These and other studies about newsroom change have also told us something deeper: Journalistic authority and journalistic identity go through considerable reconfiguration as journalists take up new technology as part of their newsroom practices. The subject of professional identity and journalistic autonomy has been discussed by Schudson and Anderson (2008), who are informed by Abbot (1988). They argue that, while definitions of “professionalism” are somewhat murky for journalism, journalists nonetheless see themselves as authoritative spokespeople and believe they are capable of finding information the general public cannot.

Zelizer (2004) points out the different roles that journalists believe they have: as possessors of a sixth sense for finding news, as recorders of the day’s events, as a mirror on society, as storytellers, as a special and protected population, and as a public service. Deuze (2005) identifies some core professional values, including public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics.

On the other hand, as Deuze notes in his 2007 book, *Media Work*, there are a myriad of difficulties and changes facing journalism as a profession today that may challenge professional identity and values. Journalists no longer have reliable jobs in stable news organizations, nor do they have the same sense of cultural authority that they might have had even a dozen years ago, thanks to the rise of

the participatory Web. Journalists may now be free to think outside the boundaries of traditional news structures, but what they find might be unsettling to their professional identity. With this scholarship about change in mind, further empirical inquiry into a Web-first transition merits our attention.

The Case

The Monitor is affiliated with the Church of Christ, Scientist (colloquially known as the Church of Christian Science), but it operates as an independent publication. In 2008, the newspaper celebrated its centennial year. The newspaper, a cornerstone of the church's mandate to share knowledge, was rapidly losing money. The paper was posting losses of \$18.9 million a year. Getting rid of the daily print edition was supposed to significantly reduce these losses over a five-year period (Fine, 2008).

The Monitor has much greater influence than its circulation numbers suggest, and it is renowned for its breadth of international coverage from outposts in 11 countries, including Russia, China, France, the UK, South Africa, Mexico, and India (About the *Christian Science Monitor*, 2010). At the time of our research, there were also writers based in Baghdad and Jerusalem. The paper also leans heavily on freelancers to get news from distant parts of the world, from Cambodia to Turkmenistan. The paper has won seven Pulitzer prizes over its long tenure, and it has received many awards from organizations recognizing international reporting. Despite its size, the recognition of *The Monitor's* international reporting and long history has given it a strong stature among journalists and decision makers.

Methods

The data collection for this study took place from February 2009 to February 2010. We visited *The Monitor* at three points during its change process, as previously mentioned. We scheduled each visit to fall within approximately one to two months of the key event or change. We visited a month before the official "switch," and then we timed the other two visits so that the effects of the key change had had enough time to settle into the daily work routine. We were guided in this respect by organizational change theory, as well as by our contact with editors in the newsroom. A timed interval approach to collecting field data is considered a sound practice, according to scholars of organizational change (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002; Yakura, 2002).

The analysis presented in this article relies on semi-structured, open-ended interviews conducted during the three visits mentioned above, as well as on internal organizational documents (Weiss, 1994). We conducted a total of 39 interviews—13 during each newsroom visit. The interviews, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, were taped and transcribed. The subjects were recruited based on their time availability and willingness to be part of the project. The agreement was that all interviews would remain anonymous. Interviews explored what change meant to the journalists and how it was impacting their daily lives. We then analyzed these interviews to assess core themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), which varied by visit. Notably, the start of the print weekly rarely surfaced in conversation; journalists were much more focused on daily changes to their old routines. As such, this article focuses primarily on the Web-first initiatives in the newsroom.

We initially recruited a panel of 10 people, which resulted in five ordinary staffers from the newsroom that we could talk to throughout each visit to provide continuity. These informants were diverse in job descriptions and age (reporter, bloggers, editors), and they each gave some sense of the different roles they played in the newsroom. During each visit, we recruited five additional people from across the newsroom to speak with to fill this panel. We also spoke to three key change leaders during each visit—Online Editor Jimmy Orr, Managing Editor Marshall Ingwerson, and Editor John Yemma—but our focus was on newsroom staff perceptions of change, so these interviews functioned more as “check-ins.”

Ultimately, we spoke with a total of 23 different individuals within *The Monitor* newsroom (we spoke with three of the same individuals on two visits). While our interview respondents are a convenience sample from a newsroom of 80 (including production staff), we felt our sample represented a good cross-section of the newsroom: the sample drew from a range of positions and included people who held varying degrees of power within the structure of the organization. Nonetheless, we should acknowledge the limitation that our analysis may not speak to the entirety of all *Monitor* journalists’ experiences.

In addition to the interview data, we were also privy to internal strategy memos and emails shared with staff, as well as two newsroom-wide meetings between Times One and Two and Times Two and Three (via conference call). Although our agreement with *The Monitor* does not allow us to directly cite these documents here, they helped us to ground our visits, interviews, and analysis in a broader context.

Time One: Before the Change to Online Only

Monitor journalists knew that a big change was coming, but they did not know the details. Most knew of the impending switch to an online-only format because it had been announced to the press, but they did not know what that meant for their jobs or the goals of *Monitor* journalism. When we visited on February 24–25, 2009, journalists were still in the dark about the day the shift would begin. The formal announcement that *The Monitor* would shift to daily online-only journalism did not come until March 27, 2009, a date kept silent because managers wanted the flexibility to change it if necessary (Yemma, 2009).²

Concern About Values

Journalists interviewed were concerned about how the change might impact *The Monitor*’s founding values: “*To injure no man, but to bless all mankind.*” The guiding motto represented a value system many were proud to share. The people we spoke with all expressed that they felt they were working for a news organization different from the rest. *The Monitor* had a “humanitarian viewpoint,” unlike other news organizations that were constantly in the chase for the latest or most tabloid news, as one journalist told us. But, according to respondents, the shift to Web-first meant confronting the “unruly” discourse of the Web, which could potentially undermine *Monitor* values.

² In phone calls to plan our visit, we were given a sense of when this would happen, within a week or so of the date.

Some thought that they could avoid engaging in the vitriol of the blogosphere by “avoid[ing] the snark and personal attacks” that they believed characterized Web news. Another journalist, however, expressed doubts about being able to avoid the descent into what he saw as typical Web journalism: opinion-driven, fast-breaking news, especially because the Web world seemed to move much faster than the print world. The journalist pointed out that *The Monitor* “trends toward the thoughtful approach” (as opposed to chasing breaking news) and provides the perspective of “news with hope for all mankind.” Viewing the shift to online-only as a shift to blogging, this journalist and others felt the paper would struggle to retain its deep and considered approach to analysis. Other colleagues were similarly fearful that the new format (seen by most as “blogging”) would reject tradition, and that it would diminish the control they had over their work. In other words, the specter of change had raised questions about the future of journalistic authority. Similarly, many were concerned about the integrity of the newspaper’s content. Many expressed great uncertainty about the future.

Workflow Anticipations

Reporters were particularly worried about what the change to Web-first might mean for their authority in the newsroom. Because editors would be keeping track of when stories were breaking and, thus, when new content was necessary, many reporters felt they would lose control over what kinds of stories would appear. One journalist remarked that editors would constantly be asking themselves, “What is timely right now?” and “What should be on the home page at what time of the day?” The result would be that editors would be chasing after these stories and reporters would be left to follow their directions. In the pre-Web environment, reporters felt they had more latitude to pitch stories.

Journalists across the newsroom were also wary about keeping up with the timing of a Web-newsroom. One journalist also told me he would likely need to work harder to keep up with the “accelerated” workflow (in line with that which was observed in Klinenberg, 2005; and Singer, 2003). Prior to the transition, *The Monitor* had an archaic workflow akin to that of an afternoon daily. Staff worked a 9-to-5 day to meet early story deadlines (between 1:00 and 2:00 p.m.) so the newspaper could be delivered via post the next day to the small, national, print subscriber base. The unusual distribution method influenced *The Monitor’s* style, contributing to its emphasis on long features that would have enduring value to the reader beyond the first breaking news cycle.

The sense that everything, from story format to schedules, was going to change provoked anxiety among some journalists who knew only, as one noted, “the why, but not the how” of the way the job would change. Other journalists were deeply worried about their own future at the organization: “Do you know if your job is or is not on the line?”

This uncertainty mirrors what Deuze (2007) wrote in his work about the instability of professional journalism in a postmodern era. Management tried to keep an open conversation with journalists about change, but some journalists were clearly unconvinced by what they heard. Editor John Yemma and Managing Editor Marshall Ingwerson repeatedly told us that they were giving the staff as much information as they could through “Town Hall” meetings. However, Yemma and Ingwerson admitted, too, that they also had some hesitations: They weren’t sure what it meant to have deadlines happening

throughout the day, and how this would affect reporters and editors. Early on, they told us that they were explaining to staff the five-year strategic plan to increase Web traffic, but no one in Time One mentioned traffic.

Time One was a period of ambivalence and hope as journalists tried to understand what was about to happen to them and their jobs. They were concerned about how the values of the organization might change, a theme repeated in many of the journalism studies about technology. What is different here is the extent to which these values were organization-specific, rather than pertaining to the broader field of journalism. This seems to contradict what Russo (1998) argues about journalism, when she notes that journalists are more likely to identify with journalism than with their organization. Nonetheless, Time One still speaks to an overarching concern about journalism and professional authority, and the fear that losing *The Monitor* voice might mean losing control.

Time Two: After the Change

We waited until early June 2009 to conduct the second visit, so as to all the changes from the switch to Web-first to become slightly less immediate. We wanted to see what life was like in what some called "the new normal." Though disruption was taken as a fact of life, Web-first brought new pressures to the newsroom. People acknowledged that they were working harder, but nonetheless believed that going Web-first had improved *Monitor* journalism and allowed them to stay true to their values. On another note, though, journalists were starting to become aware of the role of Web traffic.

Adjusting to the New Workflow

In a Web-first world, deadlines looked vastly different than they had before. The morning meeting was still held at 11:00 a.m., but the news budget (or story list) now had a specific deadline for each story, a scheme designed to keep content fresh on the Web site at all times. People could cover breaking news, both because they were around to do so, and also because they no longer had to worry about an early deadline to accommodate the postal service. Most of the staff now worked between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. (with some late-night staff to approximate a 24/7 newsroom). The paper was staffed six days a week (instead of five) by three staggered shifts of employees working 10-hour days, four days a week (with no staffing on Saturday), as Yemma explained to us.

Editors spoke about having to adjust to having deadlines scattered throughout the day. One said he was now in "constant coordination with all parts of the world at any time, for any story," an important issue for a news organization renowned for international news. Another editor noted that the Web-first workflow meant more work and a more intense day. This editor cited the greater "pressure to churn stuff out," resulting in the sense that he and others were "editing too quickly," with the absence of final deadlines compelling them to do "more stories per day" and "more things on the fly." The editor was ambivalent on whether the change was positive or negative, but acknowledged that the process had been an adjustment.

Other journalists also explained how difficult it was to balance new demands. One reporter felt that because he was “not the most facile writer,” his work suffered from “the exhaustion factor.” He simply couldn’t keep up with the pace that he thought the newsroom—and readers—expected of him: a daily, sometimes even hourly presence on the Web as a blogger. He felt stressed trying to juggle writing daily stories and longer pieces for the weekly.

The Web-first world had ushered in a new reality, with new deadlines and work patterns. Our respondents felt constrained by the demands of time pressure, unlike their daily deadline experience. Although the organization had attempted to find new routines and schedules to adapt to the desire to provide a steady flow of content, it was clear that these routines were still emerging. Journalists were doing things “as they happened, around the news cycle,” as one reporter put it.

In a throwback to older news ethnographies like that conducted by Schlesinger (1973), who identified the clock as the most trenchant force in newsrooms, we see how the accelerated pressure of Web-first fundamentally altered the amount of control that journalists felt they had over their workflow. These results seem unsurprising, but it is important to document these felt changes as other newsrooms think about prioritizing Web over print, move to more 24/7 newsrooms, or otherwise feel compelled to compete in the rapid news cycle of online digital news distribution.

Changing Web-First, Changing Journalism?

At this point, the journalists we spoke to generally felt that the transition to Web-first had benefited *Monitor* journalism. Stories were viewed as more tied to the breaking news cycle, but most thought that much about *Monitor* journalism remained the same. As one journalist put it, “I’m still calling sources, still looking for mostly the same kinds of stories . . . that say something more than just the headline.” Their ability to be analytical, he felt, was still intact. Moreover, he said, they were free to “weigh in more frequently” on a topic and “not limited by a certain size news hole or a certain time of day.” In other words, to him, the transition had actually been an improvement.

While journalists did not see the Web as a threat to core *Monitor* values, they certainly felt their style had changed from magazine style to one more focused on simplicity. “There is no slow wind up with Mohammad who lives in an olive grove,” remarked one. Instead, this journalist said she needed to work to structure her articles “in a way that leads to a much more direct, basic point in paragraph” to ensure that readers were not spending extra time trying to grasp key points. Another journalist concurred, acknowledging that the format had changed to shorter, and even more informal, “mini-stories.” These blog posts were “just wonderful in 200–300 words,” he said. “It’s not how long [a story is],” he concluded, “[It’s] just how good it is.”

Other journalists felt that their ability to appropriately cover stories in the Web-first format hinged upon the kind of subject they were dealing with and their own level of expertise. A journalist offered the example of the Jimmy Orr, chief online editor, who was also blogging. Orr had “been in politics long enough to where he can make sense of things,” and he could “write a politics blog without having to do background work.” But for this reporter, things were more difficult: “For highly technical subjects, like

science," he continued, "you need a bit more homework. You can't spout off the top of your head." Despite the difficulties this journalist faced trying to adapt to the new story forms, he thought the change was good for *Monitor* journalism overall, arguing that, "With the Web, the potential reach is far greater, and we are more timely."

During Time One, we heard concerns from journalists that the change to a daily online-only format could damage the *Monitor's* unique capacity to provide public interest journalism with a humanitarian bent. They feared the snark of the blogosphere. And they worried that they wouldn't be able to provide the reporting depth they were so proud of. However, they adjusted their expectations, and on the whole, they were not resistant to change (unlike what Ryfe [2009a, 2009b] has suggested). Instead, they were pleased to see these changes in their newsroom. At this stage, journalists did not feel a challenge to their role as authoritative storytellers, because they did not see an assault on their values.

Traffic

During our Time Two visit, we saw that journalists were now aware of the importance of traffic. In fact, many of these journalists were actually fascinated by the metrics. One respondent, for example, described hits as "interesting," but ultimately not that useful. In contemplating their significance, he said he thought that doing "journalism by the numbers" wouldn't work in *The Monitor* context, because *Monitor* readers "like to be challenged" and wouldn't be driven to what might be most popular. This suggests that this journalist felt low traffic numbers shouldn't dictate how stories should be written, and that it was still important to prioritize stories that were a "pretty heavy read." For this journalist, traffic had not yet begun to influence newsroom decision making. Indeed, this journalist had not yet learned to anticipate what would produce good numbers; stories this journalist thought would attract attention often did not. Our sense was that this journalist still felt that he could work within *Monitor* values, with or without traffic concerns.

Other journalists who did recognize traffic as a measure of how widely read a story was openly resisted the idea that traffic would (or should) influence editorial content. Admitting "it feels good when a story you worked on gets a lot of exposure," a journalist noted that having a story picked up by Google News was not the only thing that mattered. "What is important that we do is *Monitor* journalism," he concluded, and "not do what everyone else [does]." His sentiment was echoed by others who still felt there could be balance between serving the goals of the future and the needs of more substantive *Monitor* journalism.

Time Two Reflections

Time Two nonetheless illustrates an organization that was extremely adaptable to change. None of the journalists we spoke with were resistant to the idea of change. Journalists were actually positive about what the changes were doing for *The Monitor* and for *Monitor* journalism. As such, *The Monitor* represents an unusual organization because the response to new technology was generally to embrace it, though journalists did admit to working harder. Instead of the fear that might come with instability that Deuze (2007) talked about, these journalists met change with remarkably open minds.

We think journalists were invested in change because they felt as though they were part of a new experiment in online journalism that still allowed them to keep their old values. Thus, the fear of losing journalistic authority to the onslaught of new technology was mitigated. The fact that Yemma and Ingwerson were not demanding specific traffic numbers at this point, and were not mandating certain forms of journalism, gave journalists the ability to try new things on the Web without worrying about consequences—yet. For instance, shorter stories gave journalists a chance to experiment with breaking news, something they had not been able to do before.

However, a slow content management system was holding back further Web-first change. A new CMS was supposed to make Web-first production easier for editors and reporters. However, as of Time Two, the home page was still hand-coded. Though manning the home page was generally a four-hour assignment, one journalist who did it for eight hours described the experience as one that left him “wanting to scratch my eyeballs out.” All files had to be sent manually, and there was no easy way for editors and reporters to update the system. Much hope was resting on the introduction of the new system. However, as we will see, while the CMS was a positive change, the new obsession with traffic created serious concerns for *Monitor* journalists.

Time Three: Introducing the New Content Management System

Our next visit to *The Monitor* was in February 2010, two months after the new content management system, ezPublish, was put in place. The visit was also almost a year after the announcement of the move to being a Web-first newsroom without a print daily. According to Yemma, the goal for the new CMS was to “democratize Web publishing”—a phrase that others in the newsroom had quickly incorporated into their vocabulary. Time Three offered a good opportunity to investigate the extent to which, a year later, journalists’ sense of autonomy and identity had remained intact in the wake of all of the changes in the newsroom, especially since the new content management system was designed with autonomy in mind.

In our check-in with management, we received updates that were largely focused on questions of traffic and content management. Both Yemma and Ingwerson shared more details of the five-year strategic plan, with its specific annual traffic goals and a final goal of 25 million pageviews per month. Since the pressure was on from the business side of *The Monitor* to become profitable and monetize the site through hits, *The Monitor* editors were now charged with engaging in search engine optimization, chasing Google Trends, and pushing content out on social media sites. Ironically, during a time when journalists had greater involvement in the actual production and marketing processes—thanks to the CMS and the encouragement to do more with social media—many reported that they felt increasingly less power over the kind of content they could produce.

The New Content Management System—ezPublish

The implementation of the new content management system had yielded mixed results. Some journalists were still writing in Microsoft Word and passing on their files to editors, while others were actively putting links into their copy, cropping photos, and editing within the system. A number of these

people reported doing more work on the production side, but they also felt they had more autonomy over the way that content in their various sections appeared. "The writer controls more aspects of the presentation of the story," said one. He felt this was a positive development because, as "the person closest to story," the journalists is "best suited to see what is in the overall picture."

Some respondents were pleased with the way that the content management system had spread through the newsroom, citing a simple how-to guide put together by a Web-savvy colleague as having facilitated the transition. One journalist explained that "democratizing the Web meant making Web production compulsory for all" and gave everyone a role in news production. Editors became much closer to the Web production process, taking more control over how the story would appear on the website. Editors, along with reporters, now had increasing involvement in handling images and linking stories to related content, which made the newsroom seem more "egalitarian," according to one journalist.

For other journalists, however, the content management system directly resulted in their jobs becoming a more work-intensive experience. "There's a lot more work and a lot less time to think about news or assignments or [to] conceptualize things," reported one. The "work" he referred to seemed to be more busywork than substantive work; he cited spending "a lot more time responding and doing mechanics" and dedicating "15 minutes doing bits and pieces" of things that, before, had been done by the Web team for each story. Then, once the mechanics were out of the way, he still had to "tweet and update my Facebook, and finally . . . send out a note to my HuffPost guy with our story list."

The increased speed of production and, now, the chance to control the means of production via the content management system, created new constraints on the kind of journalism that the *Monitor* staff had been used to producing prior to the shift, some said. Moreover, the new system made it harder to do long-term planning for high-impact stories, at least according to a minority of the people we spoke with. In the past, these longer stories had previously served as a symbol of *Monitor* excellence to these journalists; now, these stories were relegated to the far less visible print edition, a fact pointed out by many of the journalists.

On one hand, journalists had more autonomy to be part of the news production process. On the other hand, others felt both constrained by the new work flow, and that they no longer had the time to do the work *The Monitor* was known for. The change had been a seamless integration for some, but for others, it marked a turn away from doing what one described as the "real work" journalists were supposed to be doing.

Journalism Changes and Traffic

By Time Three, what had been a peripheral awareness of traffic had transformed into an obsession. "We need to build traffic or lose our jobs," a journalist summarized. The top editors were now freely sharing traffic numbers with staff. Many of our respondents, who now had a better understanding of what traffic numbers meant to the future of the newsroom, felt that prioritizing traffic was antithetical to the type of journalism that *The Monitor* represented. As mere journalists, rather than top editors or business staff, however, they felt powerless to change these organizational imperatives—a stark shift in

attitude from Time Two, when people believed they could balance concerns about traffic with upholding *Monitor* values.

Traffic was so much a part of the workflow that, at the 10:00 a.m. Page One meeting,³ numbers were announced for each story, and the editors reflected on why a story may or may not have garnered readers. They talked about how headlines could be written better to increase search engine optimization, and how to optimally time the distribution of stories to get more pickups on Google News. Instead of focusing on developing each story, we observed that editors were concerned with chasing Google Trends.

Summarizing the concerns of many about this shift, a journalist remarked, "I am certainly a huge advocate of getting *Monitor* copy out there," but she wondered if the rush to "get traffic within the mandate of the numbers" meant *The Monitor* was losing its ability to add "the voice of reason" to public dialogue. She referenced *The Monitor's* continuing coverage of Sarah Palin, even after the 2008 election had passed and Governor Palin's activities had begun to border on the bizarre. "Are we really contributing to the conversation," she reflected, "or are we contributing to the screaming match that the Internet facilitates so easily?" Her concerns about the "screaming match" echo many of the initial fears reported in Time One that a *Monitor* transition to the Web would entail a fight to avoid succumbing to the snark of the Web.

She stressed that she had "no problem with fun things" and recognized the value of using brief items to bring people to the site. "But when those bec[a]me a big part of their effort to get traffic," she confessed, it made her "a little more uncomfortable." Worse still, it seemed, was that she felt that their blog coverage of incidents like a mid-flight assault by an irate passenger on then-assumed presidential candidate Mitt Romney (note the date: 2010) was both of little news importance and "uninteresting": She worried, like many others, that the newsroom could not go beyond the attention grabber.

Another journalist echoed nearly all interviewees' concern that it seemed like traffic numbers had become the driving purpose behind decision-making in the newsroom. As a result, these journalists were not engaged with new, innovative projects, but instead, were caught up in a demoralizing attempt to chase traffic. Citing a story on the Google bar code that had garnered 340,000 hits, this journalist explained that "things are shouted out about when they get a lot of hits" (i.e., editors gave praise to these stories), but in the case he referenced, "It was a story about a bar code." He said that this kind of storytelling was "dispiriting" in the newsroom. This journalist noted that the "good stories," which he perceived as quality, *Monitor*-style journalism, might "tank" on the Web—and these were no longer as highly valued.

Although everyone knew the importance of boosting numbers, these victories were somewhat empty. Another respondent mirrored his dissatisfaction with the focus on numbers, stating, "Now we all know what's being read or not. The big stories aren't the traffic driver [big meaning "*Monitor*" important]; we're playing a game for Google News."

³ Previously held at 11:00 a.m. during Time Two.

Traffic monitoring was frustrating to the journalists we spoke to, in part because they had become more familiar with readers. As one journalist complained, the types of stories that attracted big readership were bringing readers that were “drive-by, not long-term, *Monitor* readers.” Management thought these readers could be converted into regular readers, drawn in by deeper content. But this journalist didn’t think that these drive-by readers were convinced.

This traffic-consciousness that all interviewees alluded to signaled a distinct shift for the newsroom. Before, when people would read the print paper, these journalists had no clear idea what was read. However, now, these journalists saw that editors were excited about big hits, and that the more “valuable” stories (in their views) did not receive the same kind of attention from readers—or from top editors.

A closer analysis of these journalists’ impressions of the introduction of metrics reveals two important points. The first is that journalists felt a loss of autonomy and authority over news decision making, because of the imperative they felt to alter output to meet the demands of the algorithm. The second is more directly related to journalists’ senses of organizational identity, as our respondents saw *Monitor* values as being quite threatened by the goals of traffic. The economic and business priorities had, at least for these journalists, become too central to the priorities of the newsroom. Anderson (2011, in press) and Usher (2010) have argued that Web traffic is poorly understood by newsrooms, even though the consequences for understanding traffic have never been greater. This data provides additional support that Web traffic has become inextricably linked to the heart of newsroom operations and editorial decision making.

Conclusion

The preeminent goal for editors and business staff at *The Monitor* was to have the website become a visible and economically viable presence online. In June 2010, *The Monitor* reached its traffic aspirations of 25 million page views per month. In a memo to staff,⁴ Yemma noted that, thanks to Orr’s tireless push “for us to adopt the best practices in search engine optimization, social networking, and other tools for improving our online performance, *The Monitor* [was] now a strong player among news Web sites” (Romenesko, 2010).

To a degree, this achievement seemed to have come at the expense of *The Monitor*’s identity, serving as a cautionary tale for those looking to move into the online-first approach, as Groves and Brown (2011) also conclude. At the time of our departure, journalists faced considerable ambiguity over their capacity to control content and act as authoritative storytellers in the face of the traffic goals they felt their jobs hinged upon. Although our respondents had new means to control story production, they felt the newsroom was now unduly influenced by business forces and, to a lesser extent, time pressure to alter the style and tenor of content. Though their concerns about economics and workflow echo some of the same news constraints observed by earlier news ethnographers, there is a difference now. Numbers—primarily Web metrics—have an almost mystical value in newsrooms.

⁴ Sent when Web guru Jimmy Orr left to take a job with the *Los Angeles Times*.

The focus on numbers, as noted by journalists in Time Three, impacted the values and processes of creative work in the newsroom. Journalist felt that deep, analytical stories were pushed aside in favor of quick-hit traffic pleasers and those that responded to breaking news. The lingering question for *The Monitor*, then, seems to be how to protect its journalistic values in a 24/7 Web world.

Although it is unlikely that everyone will immediately “turn off [the] presses,” as media commentator Jeff Jarvis (2008) once urged,⁵ the high costs of print means other major newspapers may consider going the way of *The Monitor*, at least at some point, as even *The New York Times*’ publisher Arthur Sulzberger has suggested (“Arthur Sulzberger: ‘We will stop printing *The New York Times* sometime in the future, date TBA’”, 2010). Thus, it is important to consider how insights from this case contribute to existing theory about professional identity and change.

We learned that journalists are more apt to embrace change when they believe that their authority is not challenged and they can continue to provide a clear (if different) voice that guides and informs public debate, as was seen in Time Two. Professional authority begins to suffer, however, when the autonomy of the profession butts heads against competing commercial imperatives that devalue the work of journalists.

These conclusions seem obvious at first glance, but the commercial pressures to attain Web traffic in Web-first newsrooms are brand new. At the time of this writing, *Monitor* editors felt that the rocky road of transition was behind them, and that quality journalism has been and will continue to be part of *The Monitor*’s future.⁶ Yemma noted that it took a while for the newsroom to understand traffic, and that my conclusions stem from the period I observed, but quality journalism would never be forgotten in the push for traffic numbers (personal communication, November 18, 2010). In my view, however, the tensions revealed during my visits showcase possible trends that may extend beyond just one newsroom, and thus provide a cautionary tale.

As Anderson (2011) observes, Web metric technologies cause journalists to quantify and to simplify their understandings of their audiences. This creates a dangerous precedent—a “culture of measurement,” as former *Washington Post* managing editor Raju Narisetti proudly described his metric-tracking newsroom (Phelps, 2012). This culture measures article worth against numbers, rather than editorial strength. It is all too tempting to think that metrics are the solution to economic woes (Anderson, in press). The result may be that editorial independence suffers at the hand of minute-by-minute data about specific article performance.

News organizations have never had such detailed information about their readership. It is easy to see how stories that are likely to lead to big traffic (and possibilities for greater monetization) might be prioritized over stories that might be poor performers in the traffic world. Journalists at *The Monitor* who believed this was the newsroom’s strategy were demoralized and concerned about the future of

⁵ Jarvis penned “Turn Off Your Presses” upon hearing the *Los Angeles Times*’ website profits outpaced its editorial costs.

⁶ As indicated in a staff e-mail I was privvy to in December 2011.

journalism. Their concerns, whether mitigated or not in *The Monitor* newsroom of today, leave us with an important lesson: As academics, journalists, and readers, we need to be vigilant about newsrooms relying too much on metrics, and we should be concerned about what metrics might ultimately mean for quality journalism.

Responses from *The Monitor*⁷

(From the submission draft 3-29-11)

From John Yemma.

Thanks, Nikki. The paper seems fair and accurate, warts and all. I can't ask for more than that. Good work!

I saw just a t [sic] few minor facts that might not be precise. I marked them in red on the copy I'm attaching. I'm also wondering if the emphasis on our Web-first transition is missing something by not dealing with the ongoing print weekly. I'm not suggesting a focus on it, but as you'll see from one of my notes, I think there's both a lot of pride in the weekly and some degree of tension in the newsroom over reporters and editors having to shift from fast-paced daily Web filing to the more standup weekly pieces.

I'm cc'ing Marshall to see if he has any additional thoughts.

Ingwerson:

Did not add anything to the conversation over e-mail.

⁷ As a methodological note, this should not be taken as a sign that all field research within a newsroom deserves a "right to review." Instead, this note is the product of many fruitful exchanges. The very final draft did not go through review by *The Monitor*, for example, as the substance had not changed. For future field researchers, I suggest that review rights be limited to checking for factual accuracy and questions about competition with other newsrooms. Review rights emerge out of negotiations for access, and they may either infringe upon academic freedom or be very helpful. Those reading this article should not think this kind of letter is a pro-forma requirement for publication.

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