

By Joe Strupp

Reporting for the Web and for Print

NEW YORK It was a landmark day for South Dakota's state senate. On Feb. 22, 2006, it voted to approve a statewide ban on nearly all abortions, sparking a new nationwide battle over an already contentious issue. As the first local law to take on the Roe-v.-Wade court decision, the new legislation focused the nation's abortion spotlight squarely on the northern heartland.

Reporter Megan Myers of The Argus Leader in Sioux Falls also felt the heat that day. For days leading up to the vote, Myers, 25, had been responsible for updating Web stories several times a day, shooting Web video of legislative proceedings and interviews with lawmakers, and writing print stories for the next day's paper. When the votes were tallied around 4 p.m., Myers had already posted two Web stories, all the while keeping an eye on other legislative activity.

When the bill was approved, Myers was armed with a digital video camera to record the vote and then get reaction from those who took part. She then had to edit the footage for the Argus Leader's Web site before she could even write her print story. "It gets pretty hairy when you try to get both things done," she says of the Web and print duties. "You get into some long days. It is a matter of time management."

Myers joined the Argus Leader in August 2005 as a business reporter. But she says the paper's new push for more Web activity sent her to the state capital in January when the most recent legislative session began. Along with veteran statehouse reporter Terry Wooster, Myers has seen her tasks change dramatically in just six months. "I am doing something completely different," she says, comparing the recent assignment to her first days on the job. "There has been a concerted effort by the home office to get video with just about every story."

Myers is not alone. From major big-city dailies to the smallest local newspapers, the Web's growing influence has not only provided fresh advantages for news presentation, breaking stories, and timely opinion. It has also created new time demands on staffers, management headaches for editors, and a host of new issues, from what to pay reporters for extra online work to deciding when to throw a scoop up on the Web.

"It makes their life more difficult to get the job done," says Linda Foley, president of the Newspaper Guild, when asked about the slew of job demands the Web has brought, and wrought, on newsroom rank and file. Podcasts, Web bulletins, and print articles may all be worthwhile, but "it means rewriting the same story several times," she says.

Not to mention reporters blogging, either for the paper's Web site or their own. More than a few staffers have been suspended or lost jobs because of such Web moonlighting. Others have objected to demands that they write blogs for the paper, take part in chats, or do online interviews. "It raises the question of what the rules are for compensation," says

Tim O'Brien, president of the Albany Newspaper Guild, and a reporter for the Albany, N.Y., Times Union. "If you are signing on from home to blog, what do you pay people who want to do this? It has started that conversation here."

Which medium comes first?

While newspapers have been posting news on the Internet for more than a decade, their sharp increase in Web focus in the past year has many reporters and editors wondering in many cases whether online or print content should receive top priority. Concerns about time, planning, and workload have received new attention in the past year as papers ranging from The New York Times to The Fresno (Calif.) Bee have either combined Web and print newsgathering or instituted "continuous" news desks, which essentially keep the operation flowing 24 hours a day (see Part I of this series, E&P, March 2006).

For some newspapers, though, combining newsrooms has been a case of jumping into the deep end of the pool and learning to swim. At the Bee, which brought its four full-time Web staffers into the 150-person print newsroom in December, editors admit they are still figuring out the best approach. "Do I take a reporter off a [print] story to get something on the Web?" asks Executive Editor Charlie Waters. "I don't know. You have to look at the circumstances."

Doug Clifton, editor of The Plain Dealer in Cleveland, also voices some uncertainty over whether to break news online. He admits that most of his paper's stories are still held back until the print edition goes out, but notes one exception this past New Year's Eve when the local archbishop wrote to the Vatican seeking to retire.

"We had it exclusively, and there was a lot of angst about putting it on the Web," Clifton recalls. "It did go on the Web, and others the next day were reporting it as though they had discovered it." But he mentions a sports story about a managerial shake-up at the Cleveland Browns that the paper broke on the Web and was credited by ESPN.

"There can be reservations about scooping ourselves and giving too much away online," says Jeff Gordon, a sportswriter at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and president of the St. Louis Newspaper Guild. "When you are trained to craft your story for the newspaper, it is a challenge." Frank Witsil, a crime and courts reporter at the Detroit Free Press, agrees, noting "there are issues of exclusivity, when you put something on the Web," adding that "there have been a few cases of that."

Post-Dispatch Editor Arnie Robbins says he tends to put more breaking news online unless it is a story the paper knows it has exclusively. "I do not think it is scooping ourselves," he says of the online report. "I think we have to break it online, but with the complexities and detail in the paper."

Growing pains

But the major new issues for most newsroom staffers are increased work demands and

time constraints. Just a few years ago, reporters concentrated on getting a story in before the daily deadline. Now they may have to get the news online almost instantly, with likely Web updates on major breaking stories to be added several times a day — in addition to the eventual print version. Add to that requests for audio and video components, podcasts, blogs, and chats, and the daily "to-do" list of journalists becomes decidedly greater.

"I might as well have just gone to work for AP," says Mary Beth Schneider, a state government reporter at The Indianapolis Star. Schneider, who has worked in the newsroom since 1979, adds, "It used to be that as a newsroom reporter, you had time to reflect and write the story. Now we still have to reflect, but we don't have the time." She cites a standing rule at the paper that requires a story from a press conference to post on the Web within 15 minutes. As new policies like these become implemented, she adds, "There is some resistance on the part of those whose blood pumps ink."

Schneider covered the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, where her duties included writing both Web and print stories while also feeding audio reports for the newspaper's Web site. When the Indiana legislature held a late-night session in early February, she recalls updating the Web each time a bill passed: "It went until well after 11:30 p.m."

Michele Derus, a housing and real estate reporter for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, says her beat requires regular reporting on housing and real estate statistics, which are often released in the early hours of the day. "That is part of the push, to get them up," she says. "It takes time in the morning."

C.J. Betit, president of the Portland Newspaper Guild in Maine and a sports assistant at the Portland Press Herald, says that having to feed the Web site with updates throughout the day stretches the paper's resources. He says staffers have been required to contribute Web updates twice daily. "Some resent the extra work and the fact that this new medium is taking readership away from the paper," he says. "There are definitely some growing pains."

And when reporters are updating online during the day, they are often missing out on researching stories. Witsil of the Free Press recalls covering a court hearing following a 2004 Detroit Pistons game during which several brawling players went into the stands. He stepped out for a moment to file a Web update, and was then unable to get back into the courtroom because it had become too crowded. "It was a lesson that you have to consider when you file," Witsil says. "It is one more thing to put on a reporter's plate."

At The Washington Post, staffers say they are glad to take advantage of the Web, but admit an increased workload and concerns over its inevitable effect on quality. "That is worrisome for those of us who want to have time to do proper reporting and write proper stories," says Rick Weiss, a reporter and co-chair of the Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild's Post unit. "We are getting spread very thin." The union also has raised concerns over compensation for bloggers, which is not always done equally.

But Post Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr. defended the paper's workload, claiming that "most people work rather long hours by choice. They are eager to be on the Web."

Other top editors say they understand the concerns over growing demands, but contend that the new nature of Web/print newspapering requires it -- and is often just a matter of prioritizing. "I think things will even out," says Dennis Ryerson, editor of the Indianapolis Star. "There is a bit more work, but I think people are wrestling more with the concept." Joel Rawson, executive editor of The Providence (R.I.) Journal, agrees. "I'm not convinced that the workload has increased," he asserts. "But it is a new way of thinking. That is what the demands of the job will be and it depends on how the individual manages their time and handles it."

Such explanations do not completely satisfy those in the trenches. John Hill, president of the Providence (R.I.) Newspaper Guild and a Journal staffer, says the issue is greater than organizing duties, adding that extra compensation may be in order: "Our philosophy here is that we don't have a problem with them giving us new kinds of work to do, just as long as they pay us for it. It is an extra thing to do, for the Web." He says that so far, nothing unmanageable has occurred -- but as Web demands increase, it will require certain issues to be included in upcoming contract talks, and a possible realignment of beats and job descriptions.

It's an issue not just limited to major-market dailies. Smaller papers such as The Daily Journal of Kankakee, Ill., and the Naples (Fla.) Daily News, both of which have boosted their Web reporting with online video and audio newscasts, are good examples of papers that are realizing that in order to get more, you have to do more.

Naples Editor Phil Lewis admits that additional work, such as reporters having to carry digital recorders to gather sound along with their print work, means more responsibility. He acknowledges that many stories must get online sooner and cannot wait until the print deadline: "You are always on deadline. That is the hardest thing."

Rules for a new realm

Increased workloads and get-it-up-yesterday deadlines aren't the only new issues facing newsrooms these days. Staffers are also now wondering whose task it becomes to edit Web stories. Others worry that the little legal protection online writers have is forcing union leaders and management back to the bargaining table, or at least to informal meetings to rewrite or create policies that until now were never needed.

At the Richmond (Va.) Times-Dispatch, concern arose over the Web staffers who edit copy, says Michael Martz, a 20-year reporter and union leader. "We don't have any editorial control that I can see," he says, noting that the Web site is operated by owner Media General's interactive media division. "There is very little journalistic experience among that staff." Media General responds with the statement, "Our Web site distributes the very best of our journalism. It's a team effort between the Richmond Times-Dispatch

and TimesDispatch.com involving very qualified journalists and experienced editors."

For The Philadelphia Inquirer, a plan to have reporters adding online insight to issues related to print stories brought a quick denouncement from the Philadelphia Newspaper Guild, according to Henry Holcomb, guild president and a business writer. "It is coerced volunteerism," he says about the extra approach, which was quickly dropped. "There is a sense that if I want a good assignment, I have to agree to do it."

Holcomb also says the paper has been unwilling to discuss additional compensation for bloggers, while the issue of legal protection for online material has sparked a dispute over how much the paper will provide: "It is an important thing that is not being properly acknowledged."

Inquirer Editor Amanda Bennett contends that enough staffers want to do Web work that concerns about coercion are unfounded. "Some people who did not want to do it had a fear factor" about doing it, she admits. "But when they figure it out, they want to do it." She said eventually enough reporters came around that the online discussions have begun, adding that the paper recently launched a new formal training program to teach its staffers the finer points of writing and posting for the Web.

At the San Francisco Chronicle, leaders of the Northern California Media Workers Guild opposed the paper's new requirements for some reporters to carry cameras and questioned whether Web work was considered an extra part of their jobs. "Some major changes were made in our contract," says Doug Cuthbertson, the local guild's executive officer. "If they load a reporter up with four or five things to do, it could become a problem."

The Miami Herald sparked some grumbles with recent plans to launch an early 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. shift in both the main Miami newsroom and the Broward County bureau, according to Rick Hirsch, director of multimedia and new projects. He says city desk reporters will rotate the shift, perhaps a week at a time, and seek to get stories up on the Web as early as possible. "It needs to be part of our news day," he explains. "News Web sites get most of their traffic starting at 8 a.m."

Other papers, from The Morning Call in Allentown, Pa., to The San Diego Union-Tribune, also use earlier shifts with the intent of getting breaking news online sooner. "We get the heaviest traffic in the morning," says Wanda Lloyd, executive editor of the Montgomery (Ala.) Advertiser, which has created a 6:30 a.m. shift for postings. "But I had several volunteers."

Foley of the Newspaper Guild says the added online work comes down to three things: compensation, training, and guild jurisdiction over Web employees. She says few current contracts even specify Web employees' coverage, or how guild employees' Web work is viewed.

"They are doing all of this at a time when newsroom staffs and budgets and resources are being slashed to the bone," Foley says. "There is also a hypersensitivity today to any

error, and that creates more pressure on journalists."

Trial, error for newspaper sites

One of the most controversial newspaper Web moves, however, has to be TimesSelect -- the New York Times' online service. TimesSelect requires non-subscribers to pay a monthly fee for, among other things, e-mail access to Times staff columnists.

By late January, more than four months after the service began, about 156,000 people had signed up for the access, which the paper claims is a greater number than it expected. But the move also had implications for those columnists who are syndicated to newspapers nationwide. Not only were those papers required to stop running the columns on their local Web sites, they also were asked not to publish e-mail addresses for the writers, requiring anyone who wants to send them e-mail to pay for TimesSelect access.

Still, the affected columnists have yet to speak out against the pay system. "It hasn't been that dramatic, and I don't hear complaints from readers," says Frank Rich, one columnist hidden behind the Web pay-wall. "As print migrates more and more to the Web, somebody is going to have to pay for it -- readers or advertisers."

Another controversial Web innovation occurred at the Los Angeles Times, which launched its "Wikitorial" page last year that took the open-access Wikipedia format and applied it to online editorials. The web program allowed readers to both comment on editorials and rewrite them. But the process soon went awry when some online vandals were able to post offensive and profane comments, prompting a shutdown within days. Michael Kinsley, the editorial and opinion editor who pushed the approach, eventually left the paper.

"It is part of the risk of starting new things," says Leo Wolinsky, deputy managing editor of the Los Angeles Times. "I think the idea was interesting. We continue to experiment."

The Washington Post, meanwhile, has resorted to filtering the online messages to half of its 40 reader blogs, and has put new limits on profanity. Web editor Jim Brady also has had to filter out mean-spirited nicknames such as "Steno Sue," a moniker given to reporter Susan Schmidt by some critics who claim she is too pro-Bush. "That is a personal attack," he says.

The restrictions began after an overload of offensive and obscene messages were posted on a blog where readers could post reactions to a controversial column by ombudsman Deborah Howell.

Eventually, the blog was removed from the site for a brief time. Howell also began using such filters on her office e-mail after hundreds of offensive messages slipped through. "We've also had to filter out some creative uses of 'ombudsman'," Brady adds. "The great thing about having a filter is that if people get around it, we can change it."

Caught in a blog-jam

Then there are the blogs, which have drawn complaints both from those who are pushed to write them on their newspapers' sites, and others who are not allowed to do so even on their own. Content has raised hackles, whether they're perceived as biased or too critical.

Editors are clearly concerned that blogs, as well as online chats and discussions, can lead to reporters revealing strong views on the subjects they cover. "Our standards are very clear; you cannot be stating your opinion publicly," says USA Today Editor Ken Paulson, whose paper has staff blogs on issues ranging from the war in Iraq to weather. "But if you have a Supreme Court reporter who is a fan of Green Day and wants to blog about it, that is fine."

Downie, whose paper is leading the charge on blogs and online chats, says reporters doing such Web work is fine as long as the opinion/reporting line is clear: "That is the nature of the Web world."

His comments came after the Post was involved in one of the biggest debates to date over blogging when Dan Froomkin, who pens "White House Briefing," was asked to change the blog's name because some print editors were concerned it might mislead readers into thinking he attended White House briefings. Others were concerned that it was too liberal.

After some disagreements among Froomkin, Downie, Web Editor Brady, and Political Editor John Harris, the name remains -- but now carries an "opinion" label. But not before it drew nationwide attention among the Internet community and highlighted the impact of such online outlets. "The Web is sometimes perceived as threatening to newsrooms in letting readers talk back," Froomkin says of the whole dispute. "For some reason, some animosity was allowed to grow, but I think it is going away." Adds Downie, "The issue for me was making clear that it had opinion and was properly labeled."

Brady agrees, noting "it surfaced some tension that was in the newsroom, that there is a need for these brands to have their own identities."

More such tensions may soon arise as newspaper blogs proliferate at papers of all circulations. "It helps with the immediacy of responding that we are looking for," says William M. Dowd, associate editor at the Albany Times Union, which recently launched a blog for its editors. He says the paper also has staffers writing blogs on issues away from their beats, such as a radio and television writer who weighs in on sports.

"We thought we needed something to engage readers on the Internet that could engineer them into the paper," says Michael Tackett, the Chicago Tribune's Washington bureau chief, whose office in January launched "The Swamp" blog, which covers issues and events that come out of the Washington bureau coverage but don't necessarily deserve separate stories. "It is not supposed to be opinion. It has to meet the standards of the paper -- fairness and accuracy." Tackett says the blog has also broken news, such as

controversies over speeches by Newt Gingrich and Al Gore. "It is not meant to be one person's soapbox," he adds.

The Chronicle's editor, Phil Bronstein, stressed that newspapers cannot just put up a bunch of blogs and let them continue unchecked. "They require time and energy and a different way of thinking," he says, "figuring out how to do it in a way that serves readers." The Plain Dealer's Clifton wrote his own blog for a time, but gave it up due to time constraints. He gladly allows them on his paper's site, but also warns of the opinion line.

"That is a problem, as when you have reporters who go on the radio to be interviewed," Clifton says. "They are less guarded than they should be. You try to impress upon people that their role is not to express opinion."

Up close and (too) personal

Then there are reporters who write for personal blogs unconnected to the newspaper and have been fired or suspended for their actions. From The Hartford (Conn.) Courant to the Houston Chronicle, blogging at home has drawn the ire of editors for years. Many newsroom leaders contend that reporters cannot just go off and give their opinions online when they are still linked to the paper.

"It is something to be worried about," says Brian Toolan, editor of the Courant, which demanded in 2003 that travel editor Denis Horgan stop his personal blog. "It seemed to me that while he remained a ranking member of the newsroom, he couldn't simply start a blog and opine on what the paper covers."

Horgan, who left the paper in December after taking a buyout, agreed at the time to stop blogging and, at Toolan's suggestion, to create a blog on the newspaper's Web site. But his Courant version underwent editing by newsroom leaders and stuck mostly to travel issues.

"I was puzzled by the logic, and I still am," says Horgan, a 24-year veteran of the paper, about the request. "My view was that I am a representative of the paper when I am working, but I am not a 24-hour-a-day guy."

Daniel P. Finney, a former reporter for the Post-Dispatch, caught similar flak in 2004 when he penned an outside blog which criticized the paper and discussed stories he had written. "You don't want someone to have a blog that undercuts you or scoops you," recalls editor Arnie Robbins, who was managing editor at that time. "They have to live up to the standards of our ethics and freelance policies."

Finney, who eventually resigned and now works in the marketing department at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, declined to comment specifically on the incident. But he laments the fact that newspapers today can require such limits on reporters' personal time. "The business wants more control over the lives and thoughts of the staff than before," he

says. "I warn people now, never let there be a written record of what you think."

Steve Olafson had a similar experience when he was fired from the Houston Chronicle in 2002 after editors discovered his blog, even though he agreed to take it down. He tells E&P he understands why he lost his job, but believes it was partly to send a message to staffers about control. "I think they freaked out," says Olafson, who now works in real estate investment, but has since restarted the blog. "The ironic thing is they have gone whole hog on blogs and even link to my blog now." Since November, when the paper redesigned its Web site, Olafson has been among some 60 blogs highlighted through the Chronicle Online's "Blog Watch."

Audrey Hudson, a homeland security beat reporter for The Washington Times, says she gave up her home blog last year after the feedback "turned nasty." She also admits it was a lot of work: "It can become a chore." Soon after, Editor Wes Pruden issued a staff memo requiring employer permission for personal blogs. "Most employees, especially reporters and editors, should recognize that even though their comments may seem to be in their 'private space,' their words are a direct extension of the newspaper," he wrote. "Editorializing about a topic or person can reveal an employee's personal biases."

Aly Colon, reporting, writing, and editing group leader at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Fla., stresses that reporters need to check with their editors first before doing outside blogs: "It is complicated by the fact that reporters, editors, and writers are representatives of the newspaper. It is not too different from freelancing."

Even the Dover (Del.) Post found itself in the mix when reporter Matt Donegan lost his job in January, after editors discovered he had a blog that included alleged racist comments and sexual references.

"He has a right to free speech," Post Editor Don Flood told The News Journal of Wilmington, Del., but noted the postings were "just so beyond the pale he could not possibly represent us."

Joe Strupp (jstrupp@editorandpublisher.com) is a senior editor at E&P.
Published: April 30, 2006 12:20 PM ET