



THE SPARTANEDGE MANIFESTO: The future of online campus news is now

by [Bonnie Bucqueroux, Publisher](#)

The MSM are in trouble

Mainstream media (MSM) are in turmoil. Newspaper readership continues to decline, as fewer and fewer young people acquire the newspaper habit as they grow up. The [Wall Street Journal cited a Newspaper Association of America study](#) that showed newspaper circulation peaked in 1984, dropping 13% since then, as ad revenues remained stagnant.

At the same time, local TV broadcasters are watching their viewership and their profits erode. [The Project for Excellence in Journalism](#) found that 72% of local TV stations saw a decline in viewers between 1998 and 2002. This despite the fact that most 18- to 34-year-olds still list TV as their primary source of news.

What young people want

Young people in the United States are as bright and educated as they have ever been. So what kind of news do they want (and need) and where will they get it? And where will the next generation of eager young reporters and editors find jobs in the field?

The answer in both cases is on the Internet. A [2005 Carnegie Corporation of America study](#) called "Abandoning the News" found that roughly half of all young people said that the Web is the most useful way to learn new information and it gave them "news only when I want it." Young people are increasingly abandoning "old media" in favor of receiving information and entertainment through desktops, laptops, cell phones and iPods hooked to the Internet.

But traditional news organizations are learning that moving their traditional news products onto the Internet is no guarantee of success. More than 47 million people visited a newspaper Web site in September 2005, [according to the Newspaper Association of America](#), but young people do not want the same-old/same-old. The most engaged young people are indeed getting their news from TV, but their source is more likely to be Jon Stewart's "Daily Show" than traditional broadcast or cable news shows. [An Annenberg study](#) during the last presidential election cycle showed that "Daily Show" viewers scored highest on a quiz about the candidates and their issues. Savvy young people want news with an edge, with humor, with a point of view.

Another challenge in migrating news onto the web is that traditional news outlines typically produce only a single slice of the multimedia pie. Newspapers offer text, photos and illustrations, but no sound or moving images. Radio offers sound only. TV is compelling because of its images and sound, but it cannot offer the richness and depth of information that printed words provide.

The Internet allows you to blend all these formats together into a new mix, combining text, photos, illustrations, animations, video and audio. Want to watch the



hurricane hit land? Just click on the video clip – maybe it's footage from a citizen journalist at the scene. Are you on a slow connection or a cell phone? Then click on the slide show of pictures from the scene instead.

Do you want to explore whether the increase in hurricanes is linked to global warming? Click on our in-depth text article, illustrated with a cool Flash animation that graphs the history of hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico. Or download the podcast of a noted scientist that you can listen to later. A single Web site today can offer news in (1) all of the prevailing formats, (2) all at the same time, (3) all in one place.

That kind of one-stop-media-format shopping can be compelling. Yet what makes the Web the most spectacular media distribution system even are its hyperlinks and interactivity. Hyperlinking allow you to bounce from place to place, inside and outside an individual Web site. If you want to know even more about global warming, our site should be smart enough to offer you a batch of links to the best research on the Web worldwide. The good news as well is that the more our sites links to other credible sites – and the more they link back to us – the more all of those sites rise to the top in all-important search engines like Google, so that even more people who care about the topic can find us.

Interactivity gives visitors a chance to have their say and say it right now. Have an opinion about the politics of global warming? Leave a comment after our articles or join our forum or listserv. We may have a moderator to ensure civility, but everyone worldwide has the chance to participate. Are you an expert? Then maybe you should contribute to the wiki on global warming that our site is building or that we can link you to.

Traditional news is a monologue, not a dialogue. Yes, you can write a Letter to the Editor. But it will appear days later, if at all. It may also be cut and edited beyond all recognition. And, yes, you can always throw something at the TV screen. But that's far less satisfying than venting your spleen in a blog that allows others to respond in real time.

There are now an [estimated 1.3 million bloggers](#) in the United States and [30% of the general public now reports having read a blog](#). Most blogs are less-than-newsworthy personal commentaries. However, the political power of blogging cannot be ignored. In the last election cycle, the conservative "pajamahedin" political bloggers who challenged CBS' reporting on George Bush's National Guard record arguably forced Dan Rather's speedy retirement and the sacking of producer Mary Mapes.

What will the future might look like

The two biggest limitations for Web news right now are imagination and the lack of a certifiably profitable business model. And while major news corporations might disagree, the failure of imagination is the real barrier. If we learn how to build compelling news portals that people love, there will always be ways to support them. Maybe not at the 30% profit levels that today's mega-news-corporations and their stockholders currently demand. And it may mean relying more on freelance citizen journalists than the full-time staffers of today. But the economic model will emerge.



Again, the real barrier is imagination. We have only begun to envision the Web news of the future. Traditional news organizations, for the most part, are stuck in the mode of shoveling existing content onto the web, with little effort spent on making it more engaging and interactive. When prodded to add a little video, newspaper sites often respond by ordering already stressed reporters to generate a few seconds of video while they are on scene. With little or no training, marginal equipment and no extra pay, no wonder the results range from uninspired to dismal. Some newspapers join forces with a local TV station to produce a joint Web site where they both shovel their existing product. Rarely do they do more than add a survey or maybe an e-mail address for feedback.

A few news organizations are trying to re-think the delivery of news in an online environment. The exceptional Bonita News <<http://www.bonitanews.com>> offers cutting-edge design and multimedia. MLive <<http://www.mlive.com>> , the Booth Newspaper Web portal for its Michigan newspapers, has found a solid niche offering news and interactive commentary on sports, particularly high-school sports. They are now in the process of conceptualizing what a statewide newspaper online would look like, with multimedia content flowing from its stable of existing Michigan newspapers. The Detroit News is breaking new ground with its political multi-blog, where a stable of commentators offer content for free <<http://info.detnews.com/weblog>>

One of the many beauties of the Web, however, is that it still offers the little guy affordable access to the field to try out new ideas. You cannot start a new daily newspaper or TV station without risking millions of dollars, if you are lucky enough to have them to spare. But the bloggers at Raw Story have broken major national news on the Plamegate scandal in Washington with a monthly budget of \$250. Chances are, the upstarts rather than the corporate giants have the imagination to invent this new future.

The SpartanEdge.com challenge

SpartanEdge.com has an opportunity to help invent this new future. It benefits from serving the Michigan State University community of students, faculty and staff -- a real community. It also benefits from being its ability to draw reporters, editors, photographers, videographers, animators, cartoonists and bloggers from a pool of talented, enthusiastic, energetic young people. Some of these young volunteers will be the ones who push the boundaries of what Web journalism can do.

How will the SpartanEdge.com site be different? All we can do is promise that it will be an incubator of new ideas. It will launch spring semester 2006, with news, features, streaming video, forums, surveys, blogs, podcasts and maybe a wiki or two. What it will contain by the end of that semester will depend on our collective imagination and our resources (little or no money, some equipment, software and server space, but lots of energy and imagination).

Our mission is to provide the online campus news of the future now. We have a vision that blends media convergence with interactivity in innovative ways that engage visitors. Our values include a commitment to creativity, accuracy and a strong point of view, with a bit of irreverence thrown in for good measure.

We cannot promise to be comprehensive but we can guarantee that we care about the stories we offer -- and hope that you will, too.



Will you join us? We need visitors, contributors and advertisers (and feedback from all three). This is your chance to help us invent the future -- now.
