

Essay on the 2010 CDiG Conference
By Tom Warhover

The Associated Press was born of a disruptive technology that created, or helped create, the core content model for much of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The telegraph fundamentally changed the way we consume news.

The popular story that the inverted pyramid was developed to get news across undependable wires during the Civil War is wrong.

It was economics that changed the way we write. Telegraph operators charged as much as a penny a character.

So a tweet would cost you \$1.40.

Now we come to fundamentally new ways to tell the news.

At this spring's CDiG conference, RJI futures lab director Mike McKean talked about the future of journalism as a multimedia experience. I agree. As a storyteller and news provider, I get excited thinking about the possibilities.

But there's a more fundamental opportunity here.

Journalism's niche is in sense-making.

USA Today used to brag that it had more "facts per inch" than anyone else.

For several years, I have called for us to have more "meaning per inch."

We have all this information at our fingertips. And yet people are still hungry for someone to make sense of their world.

Here's the opportunity.

Former RJI fellow Matt Thompson says:

"For the first time, we have a medium perfectly equipped to capture and deliver both episodic and systemic information.

“How will these two modes of information interact on the Web? What sort of design and storytelling structures must we invent to impart context?”

“Fundamentally, in a medium that’s not constrained by time, what is the future of the Timeless Web?”

Context builds connectedness.

I don’t mean connectivity. To me, connectivity describes a tool that allows me to reach out and touch others.

That doesn’t mean I will.

Connectedness suggests a relationship with other people.

Connectedness builds community.

So the question: How do we harness chaos to create better connectedness that sustains community?

I’ve been working with others to develop tools that address the issue of context.

We in the journalism industry need to stop thinking in iterative steps. That’s what led us to shoveling our front pages onto home pages and assuming people would use them in the same ways.

We need to drastically change our habits. We need new language, new publishing systems, new workflow, new stories.

An example: Over the past six months at the Missourian, our student-journalists have been developing “thecomoyouknow,” an encyclopedia service for all things local. It features staff written and citizen contributed items. It relies on checks by editors before publication, thus preserving a newspaper brand that’s unlike Wikipedia.

With thecomoyouknow, we could write a two-inch report about the work on MU’s columns rather than a 12-inch report that contained 10 inches of background.

Thecomoyouknow was a response to the need for systemic information (context) to supplement the episodic (“news”).

Or a way for the episodic to supplement the systemic.

It won't be enough in the future to link to another story when the information you need in order to understand is in the 15th paragraph of that link.

It violates the increasingly accepted idea that people want information when they want it, in whatever way they want it.

Fifteen years ago, at another newspaper, I helped create a series of weekly topics pages loosely around the institutions of civic life.

The managing editor at the time called them "the amazing-in-depth at-a-glance reports."

They died after a few years.

It took too much effort to maintain them.

Now, though, we can make every story, every blog post — every unit of journalism we create — into the amazing-in-depth at-a-glance report.

The semantic Web, some smart editors and a whole bunch of programming development will allow us to do just that.

For the past three years I've been involved in building a publishing system from the ground up. It doesn't "fix" legacy systems. It makes few traditional assumptions.

Junit™ systematically changes the way news is conceived, produced and consumed. In the Junit™ system, everything is related. It breaks down linear newspaper design and concept. The capsule page – a series of related journalism units that provide context, immediacy, relevancy and interaction – is at the core. Every page, then, is a home page, a story page, a photo page, a blog page, and more.

At least that's the idea as we prepare to launch the first version at the Columbia Missourian.

Even then, we in journalism will have more work, because we need to do the same thing for mobile, e-reader – for all the digital devices of the future.

That requires decisions. We need low-low design and high design. In print, we need to return to "layouts" for most pages – and in fact automate most of the work – and reserve design for the high visibility pages.

We need low design for the Kindle type readers. High design for iPads.

We need quick hit reports and deep, layered stories. We need to cut out the boring middle.

Tristan Harris of Apture put it this way at the South by Southwest design conference this spring: How do we get context to scale?

That's the work of the next 10 months and the next 10 years.