

Successful Combination of On-line and Print a Newspaper Experience From Germany

Paper presented to the New Media 2000 Conference
in Grahamstown, 9-12 September 1997

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1. Introduction

This paper argues that there is not necessarily a contradiction between the traditional way of selling a printed newspaper and presenting it at the same time on-line and free of charge for Internet-users. This paper even asserts that the combination of these two different ways of publishing news can be a fruitful strategy for economic as well as journalistic success. But it also limits the hope of big business over the Internet. For a long time publishers will still make the lion's share of their money with printed newspapers and not with on-line editions.

This paper is based on the experience of a German national daily newspaper called „die tageszeitung“ or just „taz“. As far as I know it is the only daily newspaper that publishes the full text of all articles over the Internet, hours before the printed version appears. Among other editorial companies there still seems to be big fear of cutting of sales by offering the contents of the printed newspaper for free use over the Internet. Hence their on-line editions are limited to a small part of the printed version of the newspaper and appear later.

2. Traditional and electronic publishing

If we look at the advantages and disadvantages of an on-line newspaper and its printed version, we see that they do not compete in the same field. A traditional newspaper is cheap and can easily be carried along. You can read it without any further equipment in the bathtub, at the breakfast-table or in the commuter-train. The big format allows you to jump from one headline to the next and read it in portions. You can store it at no cost.

An electronic newspaper offers almost unlimited space. Besides text and photographs it can provide video and audio clips. The information can be updated continuously and swiftly. You can read it instantly all over the world. It offers direct links to archives and other sources of information. Communication among readers and between them and the editors is easy.

It becomes obvious that the advantages of the print-version are the disadvantages of the electronic version and vice-versa. Or in other words: traditional and electronic publishing are complementary.

3. The steps towards an electronic newspaper

It was this belief together with a strong curiosity in the prospects of the new technologies that made the "tageszeitung – taz" get into electronic publishing in beginning of the 90s. The first

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step was to produce a CD-ROM containing the text of all articles ever published since electronic storage had been introduced in 1986. In 1994 the „taz“ was the first German newspaper to offer such an electronic archive of current affairs. It became an overwhelming economic success. Since the cost of production was very low, every sold CD-ROM meant a second revenue out of the work already done before.

From then on the internal electronic archive of the „taz“ was updated every evening whilst the newspaper was being printed. For external use an electronic gateway was offered through service-providers who charge for received information, e.g. the German Beltel. This service attracted mainly professional users like journalists and politicians who found the updated archive the ideal complementation to the CD-ROM which is updated once a year. In September 1996 a double CD-ROM appeared on the market containing the text of all „taz“-articles published in the last ten years. It is retrievable within seconds by using date, subject, author, headline or by any string of letters in the text. It again became a huge economic success. Some 5.000 copies were sold for a price of R 200.

In 1995 the „taz“ was again the first German newspaper to present an on-line-edition over the Internet. This step required only some programming work to automatically convert the data that already existed in the internal archive for Internet purposes. Most of this development was done in co-operation with the Technical University of Berlin. The university also conducted a survey among the readers of the Internet-edition of „tageszeitung – taz“². In ten months an amazing 3.000 completed forms were returned and evaluated.

The archive CD-ROM as well as the Internet-edition only offer text and some few graphical elements. The photographs of the printed version cannot be included because of copyright problems and because of the huge amount of data they would require.

Also in 1995 the local edition of the „taz“ in the City of Bremen joined a non-profit „citizens information-network“. In co-operation with competitors on the print-market it supplies all the information about theatre, cinema, etc. in Bremen for an on-line calendar of events.

All these activities in electronic publishing did not at all reduce the sales of the traditional printed version. On the contrary on-line-presence seems to attract even new customers to the newspaper because on-line-users become acquainted to its contents and start to buy it regularly. This seems to be true also in the case of the citizens information-network in Bremen. An on-line calendar of events can not at all compete with the printed version as far as utility and entertainment is concerned. Income from advertisement in the on-line edition of the „taz“ is still not very big, amounting to some R 30.000 per month which represents less than two per cent of the income from advertisement in the printed edition.

3. Why the „taz“ became leader in this development

Why did the "tageszeitung – taz" spearhead the development towards electronic newspaper publishing in Germany? This has to do with its unique background. It is the only daily newspaper in Germany that does not belong to one of the big media companies. Today it is owned by an independent co-operative of some 3.300 readers and staff-members. It was founded in 1979 with nothing more but the prepayment from some 10.000 subscribers from the „alternative“ movement in Germany. In the beginning it therefore mainly focused on ecology, human-rights, internationalism, feminism and so-called „oppressed news“ which were not published elsewhere. Later on it became the forum for the debates in and around the German green party.

² Kuhlmann, Dirk, *Entwicklung einer World-Wide-Web-Ausgabe einer Tageszeitung*, Studienarbeit, Berlin 1996

Not economic but political interest was the reason for the founding of this newspaper. Only later it became obvious that there was a real market for it. The same process happened again when electronic publishing became possible ten years later. In the beginning the „taz“ did not get into it to earn money, but because the people working in the newspaper were keen to find out about the possibilities of the new technology. They were not afraid of the necessary changes in their daily work-routine. And since internal hierarchy is very low, there was a smooth co-operation of editorial and technical staff during the period of implementation.

4. Who are the on-line-readers?

Today the confirmed server statistics show that the on-line edition of the „taz“ attracts more than one million page views per month. In August seven gigabyte of data was sent out. This seems to represent well over 4.000 readers per day. Some 60 per cent of them are from Germany, the other 40 per cent use the possibility to read their newspaper abroad where it is not accessible otherwise. More than ten per cent of the data went to the USA, four per cent to Britain and just 0,13 per cent to South Africa.

The above mentioned survey indicates that half of the on-line readership of the Internet edition of „taz“ read at home, the other half at work. More than a third of the readership pronounced a willingness to pay for the on-line edition of the „taz“ in the form of an electronic subscription. They considered an amount of about half the price of a subscription of the printed newspaper as adequate.

Statistics also show that the launch of the Internet edition had no direct effect on the sales of the printed paper – neither positive nor negative. But it nevertheless had a very positive effect on marketing and acquisition of advertisement.

5. The future of electronic newspaper publishing

The experience of „tageszeitung – taz“ proves that it is possible to add an on-line version to a printed newspaper at very low cost. Although the use of the Internet-edition is free, on-line advertisement can provide a limited revenue for the editorial company. Since there are no negative side-effects on the sales of the printed version nothing stands in the way of getting into electronic publishing. Hence it is possible to offer two new aspects: The newspaper can be read hours earlier even outside the region of physical distribution and free of charge.

But it needs a lot more than just converting the data of the printed paper for the Internet to make real use of all the new opportunities that on-line publishing could provide. A full-scale Internet newspaper should contain more than just text. But besides the technical problems which arise from the huge amount of data necessary for the display of photographs, video and audio clips, a lot of additional editorial work would also be required to present the electronic newspaper in an adequate shape.

The index on the small screen should show more than just the same headline and subtitle used in the printed version. A short summary should come along with it to make orientation easier. Links to other sources of information and archives on the Internet should be introduced into the text of the articles. In the next step the Internet-edition could be updated not only once a day, but continuously. This would require a somewhat big change in the organisation of the newsroom which so far only works towards the daily deadline. Additional staff would be necessary.

However, all these ideas still stick to the conventional idea of a newspaper as a solid product offered by an editor for a big readership. But electronic publishing could also provide something very different: a personal information service edited for the specific interests of only one reader.

Already today a newspaper-buyer does not only pay for information. With his choice of a specific newspaper he also chooses a specific selection of information which his paper stands for. And in fact more time of newspaper editors is dedicated to select news rather than to gather it. But the choice between five national daily newspapers in Germany can not at all meet all the thousands of different interest-profiles in the population. Today only very few politicians or top-managers receive their personal package of information provided by their staff from newspaper-cuttings, summaries of TV and radio programmes, etc. In the future electronic publishing could offer such a service to everybody.

6. On-line and print will coexist

However on-line publishing will not easily substitute the printing of newspapers. This could only happen when a very cheap and reliable technology for broad-sheet-printing becomes available to everyone. Today the average cost of printing and distributing a copy of the „taz“ is around R 1,90. For the same price, less than three newspaper-sized pages could be printed at home – including transmission costs of the data and depreciation of the necessary hardware. So there is still a long way to go until on-line publishing could start to compete in the same field with traditional printed newspapers. Until then both ways of publishing will coexist and hopefully complement each other.

7. Some additional background information

„die tageszeitung – taz“ is published by a co-operative of 3.300 readers who bought shares for the minimum of R 2.500 and the maximum of R 130.000, contributing capital of about R15m in total. With a circulation of almost 70.000 the „taz“ is the smallest of the five broad-sheet national daily newspapers in Germany, the biggest being the „Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)“ with a circulation of 500.000. However the national daily newspapers are only a small part of the German newspaper business which in its majority is local. Altogether there are 150 daily newspapers with a circulation of well over 30 million on the German market.

Local sections are added to the national edition of the „taz“ in three German cities (Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen). Advertising only contributes by less than one quarter to the turnover of almost 100 Million Rands per year. Usually daily newspapers in Germany depend for more than 70 per cent on advertisement.

For its on-line edition the „taz“ runs its own web server which is connected to the Internet by two lines of 2 MB (xlink and maz). The price for an advertisement on one of the web-pages ranges from 4.000 to 10.000 Rands per month depending on size and site. This includes a hyperlink to the advertisers homepage. The „taz“ also offers full service for advertisers without presence on the Internet.