

CURRENTS

ONLINE UPDATE: NEW LOOKS FOR THE OLD GUARD

As readers — particularly younger readers — increasingly turn to the Web for information, the nation's news outlets are struggling to devise strategies to attract them. Bryan Keefer looks at how The New York Times and The Washington Post are trying to develop an online audience.

WILL THEY PAY?

The *Times* site averages about 12 million individual visitors a month, according to the Nielsen online ratings service, while the *Post* site averages about 8 million. Perhaps the biggest difference between the two is that the *Times* has erected a pay wall around op-ed columnists via its TimesSelect program, which, as of June, had about 190,000 online-only subscribers (and 325,000 who get it as part of their print subscriptions), while the *Post* gives it all away. But when even the *Times's* vaunted columnists can generate fewer than 200,000 subscribers, it's still unclear what content online readers will pay for.

BLOGS

The *Post* launched its first blog in July 2005; it now has about forty that are regularly updated. The *Times* launched its first blog late last year and it now has fifteen, including seven behind the TimesSelect pay wall. The *Post* has gone further in embracing the format by allowing reader comments and prominently advertising the blogs on its home page, while the *Times* seems to be keeping its blogs at arm's length.

THE LOOK

In April, the *Times* retooled its site and became one of the first newspapers to use a widescreen design. While both sites retain the photo/main-story layout of their print versions, the *Times's* site now features three columns of stories (versus the *Post's* two). The *Times* has more ways to browse, too, while the *Post's* design feels more like a print newspaper, guiding readers with a slightly heavier editorial hand.



WHO'S IN CHARGE?

The sites also differ behind the scenes. Jim Roberts, the new digital news editor at *NYTimes.com*, reports to the *Times* newsroom and Executive Editor Bill Keller; when the paper moves into its new headquarters in spring 2007, the print and digital newsrooms will merge. *WashingtonPost.com*, meanwhile, is a separate operation from the print product, and its editor, Jim Brady, reports to the head of WashingtonPost.Newsweek Interactive — not Leonard Downie. The result, to date, is that the *Post* has been a bit more nimble about adding features and online-only content to its site.

CUSTOMIZATION

In July, the *Times* launched a limited preview of MyTimes, a service that will allow users to personalize their *Times* home page, pull in RSS feeds from other Web sites, and see pages that *Times* staff members have created for themselves. The *Post* has had a My-WashingtonPost feature for several years, but doesn't display it prominently; instead, the *Post* has two different home pages, one for D.C. locals and the other aimed at a national audience. Given the success of services like Yahoo! News that allow users to aggregate feeds from multiple news outlets, MyTimes looks as if it could be the next big thing in online.

TALKING BACK

Both operations plan to increase interaction with readers. *WashingtonPost.com* conducts eighty to ninety hours of online chat with reporters and newsmakers every week, and top editors from the *Times* periodically field questions from readers and answer them on the Web site. The *Post* recently began allowing readers to post comments below many articles, and the *Times* is planning to follow suit, though Vivian Schiller, general manager of *NYTimes.com*, says it will be "in a very *New York Times* way — it's not going to be a free-for-all or unedited." For both, the strategy seems to be, as the *Post's* Brady put it, "not just to own the news, but also to own the conversation around the news" — a wise plan in the era of instant online commentary.