

DAN FROMMKIN: ANACHRONISTIC VOICES

I disagree with Atrios' take on this great Dan Frommkin piece. Here's Dan:

But we're hiding much of our newsrooms' value behind a terribly anachronistic format: voiceless, incremental news stories that neither get much traffic nor make our sites compelling destinations. While the dispassionate, what-happened-yesterday, inverted-pyramid daily news story still has some marginal utility, it's mostly a throwback at this point – a relic of a daily product delivered on paper to a geographically limited community. (For instance, it's the daily delivery cycle of our print product that led us to focus on yesterday's news. And it's the focus on maximizing newspaper circulation that drove us to create the notion of "objectivity" – thereby removing opinion and voice from news stories – for fear of alienating any segment of potential subscribers.)

The Internet doesn't work on a daily schedule. But even more importantly, it abhors the absence of voice. There's a reason why opinion writing tends to dominate the most-read lists on our "news" sites. Indeed, what we've seen is that Internet communities tend to form around voices – informed, passionate, authoritative voices in particular. (No one wants to read a bored blogger, I always say.)

Atrios sez:

At this point I'm not sure how much stylistic tweaks matter relative to the structural/technology change and the recession, but it's nice seeing someone

acknowledge that much of what journalists perceive as the standards of their profession, the "objectivity," was a business choice. Journalists are still wedded to this model even if it doesn't make financial sense anymore in part because they see it as The Way Things Should Be Done rather than something which was done to maximize circulation.

As someone who has done quite a bit of work on how newspapers responded to earlier structural and technological changes, I'd say voice and genre are a critical element of finding a new successful model—they amount to far more than just a stylistic "tweak." That's true, first of all, because each new technological form has a literacy tied to it, and you can't speak in a language addressed to one medium's literacy in another medium and expect to be successful. Things like links, conversational style, and shorthand are all part of the literacy of the net, but newspapers thus far haven't really tried to speak that language.

Also, people read stuff that sounds like the language they speak. And nobody speaks AP style, not even the whitest, most "typical" middle class college educated people I know (and of course, white and college educated may not be typical). The newspapers are basically speaking a foreign language to the people they want to speak to. They're making people work harder just to get their news.

So while I agree, absolutely, that these decisions were made as part of a business decision, I think making the changes Dan suggests are a key part of finding a new successful model to structural change.