Making the News Easier To Swallow

Electronic journalists adapt to meet changes in technology and in audiences' expectations.

The Internet saved John Martinkus' life.

Martinkus, a freelance reporter working for Australia's SBS Television, was abducted in Baghdad in the fall of 2004. His kidnappers accused him of being a CIA spy. For 20 horrifying hours, they held a gun to his head as they moved him from location to location. They repeatedly told him they were going to kill him, and urged him to confess.

Instead, Martinkus kept insisting that he was just a reporter. But his captors remained skeptical.

Until they Googled him.

They found numerous references to his career as a journalist in Australia, confirming that he was indeed who he said he was. Suddenly, Martinkus says, the kidnappers stopped threatening him and, after a short time, they released him unharmed. Martinkus was spared a videotaped beheading because his captors were able to find the information they were seeking about him quickly.

It truly has become an information-on-demand world. While that was a very good thing for John Martinkus, it is daunting, and even frightening, for electronic journalists who continue to cling solely to the old paradigms of our business.

Since the beginning of journalism, we and our professional ancestors have anointed ourselves as the sole gatekeepers of information. We, and only we, have decided what the public needs to know. We have dispensed our stories like castor oil, instructing our viewers, listeners and readers that swallowing our offerings, even the occasionally unpalatable ones, should be done without protest because it's good for them. And for eons, our viewers, listeners and readers have held their noses and taken our medicine, because they really had no other choice.

Not anymore. We now live in a time when the Internet and even newer technologies have created a different kind of information elixir, one that is irresistibly enticing and infinitely more appetizing than our castor oil. It is the elixir of liberation. Computers, pagers, cell phones, PDAs, satellite radio, HD radio, RSS, iPods and other MP3 players have empowered consumers to such a degree that if we don't give them what they want when they want it, there are plenty of other places they can go, and methods they can use, to get it.

We have encountered such fundamental changes before, when radio's audio and immediacy threatened newspapers' positions as their communities' sole information sources, and when television's pictures threatened radio's position as the sole source of broadcast news. The last fundamental shift occurred about a generation ago, when our bosses suddenly insisted on making money from our news products.

We recoiled in horror, but over time we were able to adapt. We learned how to serve the public interest in such a way that the people who own our networks, our television stations, our radio stations and our newspapers could see a return on their investments. That dynamic still exists, obviously, but it's now the old news economy. In the new news economy, advances in information technologies have given consumers all of the power.

TV, radio and print journalists must embrace this notion of consumer empowerment or newsrooms as we've known them will all surely die. And embracing it may not be as hard as you might think. I mean, really, which is more important, the story you produce, or the television, radio, newspaper or magazine where it currently appears? Obviously, the story is more important. We, the professionals in today's electronic newsrooms, know how to report the news in a compelling way. We are uniquely positioned to thrive in this new world.

The elixir that makes the new news economy so enticing has four ingredients. First, it allows for instant gratification, empowering people to get the information they want when they want it. Second, it empowers consumers to participate in the process of evaluating the accuracy and pertinence of news; if a news outlet gets something wrong, it will instantly be inundated with corrections and criticisms from bloggers and other viewers or listeners. Third, it has created a legion of "citizen journalists," people who report the news in their own way, with their own pictures, on their own websites. And fourth, the proliferation of information outlets lets people easily get their news from sources with whom they tend to identify ideologically.
Chairman’s Column

Many news-oriented blogs, for example, have clear, decided points of view, liberal or conservative, and so they tend to attract readers who share their political outlooks on life. Woe unto you, however, if you use bloggers’ partisan leanings as a reason to discount their relevance. It is precisely because they present the news from their unvarnished, unhidden perspectives that people find them germane. Since consumers know from which side of the political spectrum a blogger’s information emanates, they are better able to assess its accuracy and, if so compelled, check its veracity against information available from other sources with differing points of view just a few mouse clicks away.

So what, then, are we to do? To be clear, I am not propounding that we all suddenly become advocacy journalists. That’s not who we are and the public, which intuitively knows that, would punish us for it. Instead, I’m suggesting that we take advantage of this new-fangled technology thingamabob to boldly solidify our rightful position as the preeminent sources of electronic news.

You can expect RTNDA to take the lead in this effort. One of the first things I did as chairman was to appoint a blue ribbon task force to ensure that we fully integrate new media concerns into all of our services, curricula and products.

Someday—and it will come sooner than you think—we’ll look back on radio, television and newspapers as quaint relics of a bygone era. “Electronic journalism” will mean “audio,” “video” and “text” delivered on platforms we can’t even conceive of at this moment.

After all, who would have thought just a few years ago that terrorists in a bombed-out city would be able to use a computer to find information about their hostage?—Dan Shelley is news director and assistant program director at WMJ-AM in Milwaukee. You can reach him at shelley@620wmj.com.