

# Pacemakers Winners Circle

## A Study of Multimedia, Interactivity and Content Management Systems at Top Student Newspaper Websites

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### Overview

In many ways, the situation today at college newspapers is a magnified version of the spectrum found at their commercial counterparts, in terms of both print and online. On one end of that spectrum, many college newspapers face severe obstacles with a lack of adequate financial resources, because of both budget cuts and declining ad revenue—to the point that some are going online-only. In addition, many college newspapers often have a staff that may not be very experienced or very well trained. For these newspapers, like many small weekly commercial newspapers, just putting out a print product is a challenge, and they are lucky if they are also able to just dump their content online. But, on the other end of the spectrum, some college newsrooms are full of enthusiastic and technologically savvy students who are not constrained by print-centric readers, editors and publishers and “we’ve always done it this way” attitudes. These publications are able to go beyond even what many of their most enterprising commercial newspaper peers are doing online.

Our goal was to study college newspapers that were doing things well, to look at these cream of the crop newspapers and examine their processes, technology and decisions. Our hope was that in doing such a study of award-winning online newspapers, other college (and even commercial) newspapers could have a better understanding of what they might do to improve and better serve their readers.

The plight of the first category of newspapers can be clearly seen in one very telling statistic: a little over one-third of the college newspapers listed in the Editor and Publisher Yearbook did not even have a functional website in a 2007 study (Bergland and Hon 2009). That number though is significantly higher than the figure for professional weekly newspapers, which had 27 percent without websites (Fuller 2010). While every newspaper’s situation is different, hopefully this content analysis of the multimedia, interactive and distribution features of these websites, coupled with information about publishing processes and especially Content Management Systems (CMS) gained through interviews, will give other newspapers some ideas that might work within their particular situation.

### Literature review

To be frank, there has not been much scholarship that has addressed online college newspa-

pers, nor have there been many studies that deal with content management systems of college or commercial newspapers, in spite of the huge role that a CMS plays in the day-to-day operations of a newspaper. There have been some articles that have dealt with features of college newspaper websites, dating back to 1999, when Bruce Garrison outlined components that college newspaper websites should have, such as fresh content, “searchability” and interactivity (Garrison 1999). Subsequent essays by Garrison in *College Media Review* provided an overview of convergent journalism experiments in commercial newspapers (Summer 2000) and the literature in the field (Fall 2001) and audio and video streaming for college newspapers (Fall 2000). A later Garrison article detailed the strengths of leading commercial newspapers that college newspapers could emulate (Spring 2003). However, actual research on online college newspapers has been scarce. One research project was conducted by Reimold, who studied the online-only magazine he advised (Spring 2008). Another notable exception is Adams and Bodle (Fall 2001), although they focused more on readability levels of writing rather than components of online websites. Another research study that did focus more on features of college websites was done by Bergland and Hon (2009). Using a random sampling of over 350 newspapers, the pair looked at the presence of various multimedia and interactive newspapers, finding that 30 percent used College Publisher, 35 percent used some other content management system and 36 percent had no functioning website at all. Murley and Carroll (2007) also looked at multimedia and interactivity on college websites in their unpublished survey of College Media Advisers solicited through the organization’s listserv. But, no studies have yet been done that have more than tangentially touched on Content Management Systems, although there have been a few non-research articles that have addressed that issue in the past two years. Two important ones were published in *College Media Review* in 2009, in the spring and summer issues. In the first, “College newspapers face a world of changes and choices in charting their online pathway,” author Brady Tuefel discussed some of the major options and interviews college advisers, publication managers, students and College Publisher officials face in providing an overview of the choices some universities are making. He noted that half of the 14 Online Pacemaker winners in 2007 were using College Publisher. In a follow-up article in the summer, “Selecting the right Content Management System,” Colin Quarello provides more specifics, outlining the pros and cons of the five main Content Management Systems: College Publisher, Drupal, Movable Type, WordPress and Joomla, with a few words added about those schools that create their own CMS. Of course, the dominant player, as noted in the Tuefel and Bergland and Hon (2009) articles, is College Publisher. According to their promotional materials, over 600 newspapers are currently part of the College Media Network, which was just purchased by Access Network Company (Access Network Company 2011).

One downside of the proliferation of the College Publisher CMS is that many of the websites across the country look largely the same, as Michael Koretzky laments in his Huffington Post blog with the telling title, “College Journalists are Good at Consuming Multimedia but Bad at Making It. Why?” Koretzky states that many of even the top entries in the 2009 Society for Professional Journalists college Mark of Excellence competition were mediocre. He comments that “Most of the stories on these sites are mere ‘shovelware,’ meaning print articles are tossed online without much thought. Or pictures, graphics, or video. What’s so weirdly depressing is that I’ve seen many of these newspapers in print — and they kick ass. From the design to the writing to the photography, you can tell talented students sweat and bled for their paper dreams. Their print editions have verve. Their online editions have templates.”

Of course, templates are better than nothing, which is what many college newspapers have. Bryan Murley in a blog on PBS’s Media Shift, criticizes the many college papers who have not embraced the Web and cites the Bergland and Hon study which found that more than a third

of the randomly sampled Editor and Publisher college newspapers did not have a website.

In the commercial newspaper realm, there have been many, many studies of newspapers and their switch to convergence, ranging from ethnographic studies to more quantitative studies of the features of websites such as Greer and Messing (2004) and more recently, the Bivings Group's analysis of the top 100 circulation newspapers (2006) and Russial's analysis of newspapers with over 30,000 circulation (2009). These studies do have some bearing on various aspects of this research project, as will be discussed later. However, many of the studies have focused on larger newspapers, often far beyond the circulation of most college newspapers. As a result, it is not surprising that the choice of content management systems is not a subject of their studies. For one, many of the newspapers are owned by chains, and the individual newspaper usually does not have any choice in the CMS it uses; it uses the same basic CMS that the other newspapers in the chain have used, since the parent company has typically expended a great amount of resources in buying/creating a proprietary CMS for all of its newspapers to use. Going with the same CMS leads to cost savings in terms of economies of scale, support costs and systems and training. In addition, the largest newspapers not part of a chain often also have the resources to design their own CMS, rather than choose an out-of-the-box model. Smaller, community newspapers, unfortunately, have received much less academic scrutiny. Those studies that have looked at smaller newspapers don't often focus on the online element, and those that do have not addressed the CMS issue. For example, even in a 2011 issue of Newspaper Research Journal devoted to community newspapers (including two articles devoted to online aspects of community newspapers), there is no mention made of Content Management Systems. Again, for those newspapers that are parts of chains, there is often no choice in the matter of CMS. But for independent/family-owned papers, CMS selection is very important, especially because there are often very limited resources and very little expertise at these publications. Staffs are often small and overworked, and the hit counts typically don't justify expending a great amount of time and resources in creating a first-rate website. As a result, some of these small, sometimes family-owned newspapers turn to options such as TownNews, a customizable CMS system similar in some ways to College Publisher. In fact, several college newspapers, both big and small, have dropped College Publisher or other CMS's to use TownNews. According to Town News college representative Paul Wilson, 28 college newspapers are currently with TownNews and using their BLOX CMS (including Pacemaker winner Iowa State, one of the first college sites to use TownNews), with about 10 more under contract and ready to launch soon (Wilson 2011).

Regardless, the Content Management System is very important for college publications. They don't have a chain relationship with other newspapers, so there is the benefit of having choice in the CMS. But, there is also a great deal of turnover, with the best students leaving often after one to four years on the newspaper, which makes training of staff and tailoring the CMS to fit the publication an ongoing struggle. In addition, except at the largest newspapers, college newspapers haven't gotten the hit counts or the online-only ad revenue to put a lot of time and resources into creating or customizing a CMS. That leaves them with limited choices, which will be explained in the next section.

## Methodology

Before beginning our study in 2009, we had to find answers to several important questions: How would we select the "best" newspapers to study? What website features would we look for? What was the best means for finding out information about the CMS's used and the decisions made by the newspapers? To create a method for finding out the answers to those

questions, we built upon the research methods and findings of the college and commercial newspaper studies mentioned above, as well as some studies that we've integrated into the discussion below.

### **Selection of newspapers**

Because “good” and “best” are very subjective terms, we chose to evaluate newspapers that had already been named superior by other groups. While there are numerous journalism contests, one of the biggest and most prestigious is the Pacemaker award, which is given to the very best publications by the Associated Collegiate Press, an 80-year-old organization that boasts 20,000 students affiliated with its member schools. One of the Pacemaker categories is “Online,” a general excellence category. The Online Pacemakers have been in existence for 10 years and were preceded by the ACP “Best of the Net” competition, which goes back to 1995, nearly the beginning of online collegiate journalism. Over 200 newspapers submitted entries in 2009 and 2010. According to the ACP website, “Awards will be based on design, ease of navigation, writing and editing, graphics and interactivity.”

Because the number of winners was small, we elected to use two years of winners and to examine the winners in the Four-year Daily and Four-year Non-daily categories (those categories have since changed to Large School and Small School). We evaluated the winners each year shortly after they were announced. In 2009, there were five winners in the Daily category and 10 in the Non-Daily (Appendix A). In 2010, there were 11 Large School Online Pacemaker winners, 10 Small School winners and one Online-only winner (although one of the Small School winners, the Daily Gazette, should have been classified as Online-only). (Appendix B.) We excluded the two junior college online winners, reasoning that they did not have the same student resources as the others. There was also one website, the Black & Magenta at Muskingum University, which was inoperable. This gave us a total of 18 websites for our 2010 analysis.

### **Website features**

An important part of our study was to look at what features the award-winning newspapers had on their websites. In deciding how to analyze features on the sites, we looked at other studies of commercial newspapers. One of the two main methods for researching features of websites is to do surveys of editors/publishers, a technique used by Russial (2009) and Greer and Messing (2004), who studied daily newspapers in the U.S. The other method for analyzing newspaper websites is to use observation, data coding for the presence of these features on the actual websites. Some examples of this include a two-pass system (looking at the websites on two different occasions) employed by Hashim, Hasan and Sinnepan (2007) in their study of Australian newspapers and one-pass systems used in studying the top 100-circulation newspapers (Bivings Group 2006), U.S. weeklies (Fuller 2010), Canada's daily newspapers (Sparks, Young and Darnell 2006) and the aforementioned Bergland and Hon study of college newspapers (2009). We chose to use a one-pass observational analysis. We had 35 categories that we coded for in three main areas: Multimedia (audio, video, photogalleries, audio slide-shows, etc), Interactivity (polls, interactive graphics, comments at the ends of articles, forums, reader blogs, etc.) and Distribution (PDFs, searchable archives, the ability to email an article to a friend, etc). Different from any of these studies was the addition of a few new categories: Facebook, Twitter and Content Management System. Essentially, a rater evaluated each 2009 and 2010 winner shortly after they were selected, looking deep inside the pages and coding for the presence or absence of each feature. The advantage of this method over a survey method (like that used by Russial) is that it is not subject to reporting/remembering errors, nor are there the problems of low response rates and surveys not being returned. The disadvantage is

that this system provides a snapshot, or an “any given day” evaluation. So, while multimedia and interactive features are often set into their own category and have a shelf/site life of several days or weeks, this methodological approach might result in not coding for the presence of, say, interactive graphics, when at some point during the year the site might have had an interactive graphic.

## Decision-making processes

To obtain more in-depth and qualitative data about the processes and factors that went into decision making about aspects of the websites, we also conducted interviews with representatives of the Pacemaker award winners. Those interviewed included advisers, editors-in-chief and Web editors, depending on who was most knowledgeable about the website. Based on the literature and test pilots, we developed four principle research questions:

RQ1: What multimedia features are present in award winning websites?

RQ2: What content management systems are college media using?

RQ3: What advantages or disadvantages are there in these content management systems?

RQ4: What impact does the choice of content management have on multimedia features on the website?

RQ5: How do the features of these websites compare to a nationwide study of a few years earlier?

We used these principle questions to develop 36 specific questions (Appendix C) including some close-ended questions (such as the number of page views and unique visitors), some Likert-scale questions (such as judging their satisfaction with their current CMS) and several open-ended questions (such as their procedures for posting articles and reasons for choosing their CMS). These 20-30 minute phone interviews were conducted in the late winter and spring of 2011.

This multi-modal methodological proved to be very effective in producing not only some solid numbers about the features of the cream-of-the-crop publications and what they are doing (and perhaps what other newspapers could/should be doing to be considered among the best), but also insights into some of the decisions that they have made and how they run their operations to create award-winning online sites.

## Results

### *Content Management Systems*

All of the sites use Content Management Systems (CMS) to run their websites and upload content to the sites. There has been a considerable shift in the CMS used by the 2010 winners. WordPress (WP) is the leading system among the 18 websites we surveyed in 2010 with 50 percent using it. In 2009, only 6 percent used WordPress. In 2010, 33 percent of the sites were “homegrown” (HG) systems students built themselves, compared to 48 percent the year before. About 1 percent used College Publisher (CP) in 2010 compared to 31 percent in 2009. One percent of the 2010 winners used another system while in 2009 that number was 14 percent.

We asked the interviewees for the reasons they were using their current CMS. Here is a representative sampling of their comments:

Personal interest of editors. (WP)

Short learning curve, popular. (WP)

User friendly, wide choice of plug-ins. (WP)

University switched to WordPress and offered server space and technical support. Student

familiar with it helped build site. Highly recommended. Simple and quick to use. (WP)

Personal preference of editors that took on the project. (CP)

Flexibility. (Homegrown)

Selling and placing ads is ridiculously easy. (TownNews)

We have a lot of ability to do the things we want to do. (Joomla)

In a related question, we wanted to know what advisers/editors thought were the advantages to their current CMS. Again, a sampling of their comments:

Looks good, staff preference. (WP)

Ease of uploading. (WP)

Ease of use, lots of plug-ins, free. (WP)

Free, ease of use, features. (WP)

Good educational tool, can update stuff, simple, self-explanatory, can change things. (WP)

Easy to learn and use. (CP)

Flexible, easier to do different things if you have a programmer. (HG)

Can tweak it at any time, however we want. (HG)

Can modify it, ability to do almost anything we need it to do. (HG)

Ability to monetize, create new ways of getting revenue from advertisers. Important that we control the method and revenue stream. (HG)

Advisers said there were also disadvantages to their CMS:

Harder to train staff. (WP)

Some limitations to templates. (WP)

Have to work within the constraints of the system. Previous editor thought it was a disadvantage because he wanted to work with code. (WP)

It is relatively “idiot proof,” but it’s unwieldy when we want to change the layout of the pages. (WP)

Loss of control over design, features and ad revenue. (CP)

Very difficult to change things. (CP)

Annoying to have to go through tech people to make changes. (CP)

Advertising structure is convoluted and doesn’t work well with a school our size. (CP)

Need a programmer (developer has graduated). (HG)

Very expensive and hard to maintain. (HG)

College Publisher was the predominant CMS (other than home grown systems) used by the Pacemaker winners in 2009 but not in 2010. We wanted to know why newspapers were not choosing to use CP.

“Didn’t keep up with the times.” (Mirror)

“Advertising restrictions were a big one and we didn’t like their templates.” (The Ithacan Online)

“We outgrew them. And, CP took over the primary advertising spots and it was hard to grow.” (College Heights Herald)

“We would never go with College Publisher. Never. We would not relinquish control. We do not allow anyone to sell advertising except us.” (Kansan.com)

“It doesn’t fit our needs and especially the advertising and the way the whole system works is not a good fit for us.” (The Daily Gazette)

“Other CMS didn’t do what we wanted, so we custom designed one.” (The Phoenix)

“With College Publisher there was only so much you can do with it. We didn’t have time or expertise to do something more with it, it wasn’t very dynamic.” (The Red and Black)

“We Beta tested CP 5, and did not find it intuitive or simple to change. It had unsophisticated design aspects. I didn’t think customer support was as good as it needed to be. Not a

true vendor relationship. We really had no revenue opportunity, since they took the top banner ads.” (KentNewsNet.com)

“Never considered it, didn’t know it (CP) existed.” (Megaphone)

## Website features

### *Multimedia Features*

Multimedia is one key component of top-notch websites, providing material that is not able to be viewed in print. All of the Pacemaker winners provided at least one form of multimedia and most had several forms. Eighty-nine percent provided their own video in 2010, up slightly from 2009. (None used AP video or video from other outside sources.) All of the sites provided photo galleries of some sort in 2010, up from 87 percent in 2009. In 2010 almost half, 44 percent, had audio slideshows with music or voice-over, down from 60 percent the previous year. There were a few, 17 percent in 2010, which had interactive graphics, most often using Flash. That was considerably lower than the 53 percent that had them the year before. A third, 33 percent, offered audio only, such as music or interview clips in 2010. In 2009, it was 47 percent.

More telling than the 2009-2010 comparisons, however, is the differences between these award-winning newspaper sites and the overall figures for college newspapers. The Bergland and Hon study, conducted in 2008, using a virtually identical methodology and almost all of the same categories, found dramatically less multimedia being used at college newspapers as a whole. For example, the use of video, hovering around 90 percent for the award-winning newspapers, was a paltry 10 percent in Bergland and Hon’s 2008 random sampling of nearly 400 college newspapers (margin of error +/- 4.5 percent). Even factoring out the newspapers in their study that didn’t have any website (roughly one third), the percent of college newspaper websites with video was 16 percent, less than one-fifth the frequency of the Pacemaker winners. Not surprisingly, the other multimedia categories show similar discrepancies between the overall college newspaper numbers and the newspaper websites that won awards. The award-winning sites were nearly five times as likely to have photo galleries and 10 times as likely to have audio and audio slideshows. The most complex and therefore most infrequent multimedia element—interactive graphics, which often employ Flash—are almost nonexistent in college newspapers as a whole (1 percent) but relatively frequent in the top college news sites.

### *Reader interactivity*

Several of the websites provided interactive features allowing users and content providers a way to express their views.

About half, 44 percent, had blogs written by reporters and editors in 2010. In 2009 it was 73 percent. None had blogs or forums for readers in 2010, but 13 percent had them in 2009. All of the sites had a section at the end of articles where users could write comments in both years. In 2010, 3 percent offered reader polls, down considerably from 47 percent the year before, perhaps a byproduct of several of them moving away from College Publisher, which has polls built into its CMS. Two of the sites offered a way to email the editor and one had a way to email the reporter who wrote an article. Once again, as expected, there is a huge gap between what is being done at the award-winning sites and at college newspaper websites as a whole. The winning sites were much more likely to have comments and reader and editor blogs, from two to five times higher than the overall newspaper results in the Bergland and Hon study conducted in 2008. Curiously, however, the average of the 2009 and 2010 winners in the categories of the ability to email a reporter and email/type a letter to the editor is actually

less than the overall newspapers.

### *Reader Popularity*

Readers did have ways to see which items on the sites were the most popular. Nearly half, 44 percent had a “most viewed” or “most emailed” feature in 2010, up from 33 percent in 2009. There was a big change in sites that had a link to external ranking/recommended sites, such as Reddit, Digg or Facebook. In 2010 it was 83 percent as compared to zero the year before.

### *Marketing*

A number of the websites used various means to “push” content to potential users.

All of the 2010 websites had RSS feeds, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. Those numbers reflected the growing popularity of these features. In 2009, 60 percent had RSS feeds, 87 percent had Facebook pages and 73 percent had Twitter accounts. This compares to 25 percent for all college newspapers in the Bergland and Hon study.

About half, 56 percent, required a free registration as a way to help track traffic to the website in 2010. That number is almost the same as 2009 when it was 57 percent, and much higher than the 2008 overall college newspaper figure of 16 percent.

One had a mobile device alert feature in 2010. In 2009 it was zero.

None sent out email digests with links to stories in 2010. In 2009 there was one.

Many of the sites, 78 percent, had “email to a friend” links. (We did not check this in 2009.)

*Alternative formats*

Several of the websites provided alternative formats for viewers.

Users could view PDFs of the front page or the entire paper on 33 percent of the sites in 2010, up from 27 percent the year before. The 2008 Bergland/Hon study was a little more than half that, with 19 percent of overall newspapers offering a PDF version of the paper.

There were links to an electronic version of the paper on 33 percent of the sites in 2010. That was up from 20 percent in 2009.

### *Operation of websites*

All of the online sites were updated regularly. Procedures for updating and posting materials varied somewhat, but all the sites required that material go through an editing process before it was posted. None of the sites allowed reporters to directly post their stories or other material.

Here are a few representative comments about website operation:

“The print version is compiled on Tuesday night and shoveled online the next morning. Last year, we had a staff of four motivated editors who would look at the print story and size it up for use of multimedia efforts. The students looked at it as the different journalism animal it is. Last year it was updated six times a week, but those students graduated and the site is updated less frequently. (Mirror)

“Desk editors create shells. After stories are finalized, Web editors paste and publish into the shells.” (The Daily Northwestern)

“Reporters email editors who upload, then another editor looks at it and clicks publish. Some reporters have the ability to upload, then the editor comes in and reads it, and another editor publishes it. (The Red and Black)

“Everything goes through a traditional editing process, the managing editor or editor-in-chief approves the material and then the section editors post the stories. Blogs are not pre-approved, although comments are.” (The Ithacan Online)

“Copy editors look stories over and then a ‘sender-editor’ actually posts the stories. There is

no formalized process for multi-media posting.” (The Daily Gazette)

“Contents are shoveled to the website.” (The Phoenix)

The Web editor does the posting. The Web editor had at least one other role with the paper. Reporters are not allowed to post.” (Megaphone)

“Stories are posted by one of four ‘executives’ after stories are edited. All reporters’ work must be seen by at least four people.” (TommieMedia)

Many of the sites posted stories before they were published in their college newspapers, and naturally the two stand-alone sites with no newspaper affiliation (The Daily Herald and TommieMedia) did not have to worry about whether their stories were posted before being printed. Many other newspapers, such as the Mirror post stories that won’t fit into the print edition of the paper. “I tell the students a prospective employer might be more impressed with an online clipping than a print clipping,” James Simon, adviser to the Mirror, said. The Ithacan Online updates sports scores and analysis frequently. The Red and Black at the University of Georgia publishes a significant amount of online-only stories. Ed Morales, the Red and Black adviser, commented, “About 20-25 percent of our stories are online only, and we’d like to inch that up. There’s not always enough room in the paper.”

Only one of the sites did not have unique Web content. The unique content of the other websites included video, slideshows, blogs and commenting sections. A few of the sites used their websites to produce multimedia packages. For example, in February 2011, The Daily Northwestern extensively covered another college’s attempts to curb freshmen drinking. Their multimedia package included text, video, a podcast, a map and graphics. For students at Michigan State, extending beyond just print is a “mindset,” adviser Omar Sofradzija said. “We have not viewed web and print as separate. We encourage the idea that it’s not about writing stories, but doing stories in the best medium possible. We’re a news organization—print is primary and legacy, but we’re doing all media. It’s a mindset, and we’ve had success with that.”

Unique Web content didn’t always attract users though. Simon said they tried using only video for their online stories and didn’t get many hits for the video. “In the classroom, we instruct students that print is dying and people go online for their news. But it’s a tradition for students to pick up the newspaper and get their (campus) news,” Simon said. “There’s a disconnect about what we teach in the classroom from the reality of the newspaper.”

### *Staffing*

Most of the websites affiliated with student newspapers had staff dedicated solely to their websites.

The average online-only staff at the smaller papers is just under three people, from a low of zero at the Megaphone to a high of nine at The Ithacan Online. At the larger newspapers, the number was significantly higher, with as many as 30 people on the online staff at Kent State. Staffing at the online only sites was, as might be expected, considerably higher. The Daily Gazette had 20 online only staff members and five multimedia editors. TommieMedia had 45 online-only staff members and 15 multimedia editors.

All of the websites paid their personnel, but the amounts varied widely. Here a few examples:

\$40 per week. (Mirror)

\$800 per quarter for the managing editor. (The Daily Northwestern)

Editors received a small stipend. (The Ithacan Online)

Editors: \$300 per semester; reporters and photographers: \$100 per semester. (The Daily Gazette)

\$8.80 per hour. (The Phoenix)

\$7.55 per hour. (Megaphone)

Director: \$3,000 per semester; three managers: \$1,550 per semester; 11 other staffers: \$750 per semester. (TommieMedia)

\$10-12 per hour (mndaily.com)

\$7.50 per hour (Kansan.com)

The higher rate of pay for the University of Minnesota website was not surprising, given that their online advertising income was \$100,000 in the previous year (\$1.8 million total in advertising revenue). The Kansan.com likewise earned \$100,000 in online advertising last year.

### *Hosting*

Three of the smaller newspaper sites were hosted on the college server, the rest were hosted on independent servers, while all of the larger schools used independent servers. Yearly costs for the websites (server space, domain name, etc.) averaged \$185 per year for the sites. Hosting costs ranged from zero to about \$500.

### *Length of time online*

Most of the websites had been online for a number of years with the average at 11 years. That ranged from a high of 20 years for the University of Minnesota (the first collegiate paper in the nation to go online) to two years for TommieMedia.

## **Conclusions and key findings**

### *Content Management Systems*

As noted in the results, in 2010 nearly half of the sites used WordPress as their content management system compared to 6 percent the year before and only two sites used College Publisher in 2010 compared to 31 percent in 2009. We were not surprised at the increase in WordPress-based sites. The survey along with anecdotal evidence, primarily discussions at college media conferences, suggested that there is a movement to WordPress. It would seem logical that more sites will make a switch from College Publisher to another CMS since College Publisher, which was free, began charging almost \$2,000 a year this year (\$995 for no tech support, \$1,995 with tech support) (College Publisher 2011). College Publisher does offer an option to manage and host sites using WordPress. It will be interesting to see how many takers CP gets at an annual cost of \$4,500 for that option.

It will be interesting, too, to see how many college newspapers migrate to commercial newspaper options that have developed recently. Some of those options include TownNews/Blox, which already has numerous college clients (charging \$150-\$5,000 per month to newspapers), Zope, used by the 450 Gatehouse newspapers (\$150 and up), Matchbin (\$5,000) and Adqic (\$200 to several thousand per month, plus setup costs of \$2,500 to \$50,000) (Local Media Insider 2010)

Another important finding from our research is that nearly a third of the 2010 award-winning sites used a CMS that their own developers built (down from 48 percent the year before). As advisers noted, developing their own CMS allowed them to tailor their sites to their own situations. However, as they also said, this can be problematic in maintaining the site as the students familiar with the system graduate and new students who may not know the system are forced to take over.

### *Features*

There were a few surprises among the features that the websites offered. As we expected, a high number of them, 89 percent in 2010, have video. We were surprised however that the number wasn't 100 percent since so much emphasis is placed on video. Almost all professional newspaper websites have video, even if it's only material from a point-and-shoot video camera. It's relatively easy to edit video using iMovie, Moviemaker or other software and then upload the video to YouTube. However, while we had expected 100 percent, the 89 percent figure is still dramatically higher than the 10 percent found in the Bergland and Hon 2008 survey of college newspapers. As we expected, still images are an important part of the student sites as all of them have a slide show of some kind.

Also surprising was the declining number of blogs. Again, a great deal of emphasis is placed on blogs by the professional media, yet only about half the sites had blogs, and they were for editors and reporters only. That too may be a function of the student management nature of these websites. Blogs take a good deal of work to keep up, and most students are already overloaded with other activities and may not have enough time to devote to blogging.

Only three percent of the sites offered reader surveys, down considerably from 47 percent the year before. Both numbers seem low since these are easy to do with free software available on the Internet and people like to take polls, as demonstrated by the professional media websites.

With all of these results it is important to look at the features of these award-winning websites in relation to what other newspapers are doing. It's clear from the 2008 data in the Bergland and Hon study that the top sites are much more likely in almost all of the categories to have more of the interactive, multimedia, and distribution features that help make a site better.

### *Trends to watch*

As college budgets become tighter and news consumer habits change, it will be important to keep an eye on how student news is delivered. We found two interesting examples of stand-alone student media websites and a third that is still publishing a newspaper but has experimented with an online-only edition.

The University of St. Thomas launched TommieMedia in the fall of 2009. The university discontinued its student newspaper and its weekly student cable TV newscast in favor of the new website. Few students were picking up the newspaper anymore, Kristi Bunton, chair of the Journalism and Communications Department, said. Instead, "we try to simulate a real-world experience," Bunton said. They do so by operating a website that features text, photos, video, webcasts and sports shows. TommieMedia has six advisers. "It's very hands-on for the advisers as they look for teachable moments," Bunton said.

Another stand-alone website has been around much longer and is part of an interesting story at Swarthmore College. The Daily Gazette was started by students in 1996. There is no adviser and the site is independent of the college except for website hosting fees that the college pays out of student activity fees. The rest of the operating budget, including small stipends for the editorial staff, is from advertising revenue. There is also a weekly student newspaper, The Phoenix, with its own website (which also won a 2010 Pacemaker Award) at Swarthmore but the two media do not collaborate, Dougal Sutherland, The Daily Gazette's editor-in-chief, said. The two media may cover the same event when "big things happen" Sutherland said but generally cover different stories. The two media are organized differently. "They have a much more hierarchal structure. We're a flatter structure. We have more casual reporters who will do a couple of things during the month," he said. Sutherland and Camilla Rider, editor of The Phoenix, said there has been talk at different times in the past about sharing information or

coordinating coverage but it hasn't happened.

There was one other example that may be an indicator of future trends. The Megaphone at Southwestern University exhausted its printing budget near the end of the 2010 school year and published its final two editions online only. Adviser Bob Bednar said it could be a foreshadowing. "We are watching the tealeaves and we could move the whole paper online eventually," Bednar said. There has been some discussion, but it hasn't seriously been considered yet, he said. "But if we lose some of our budget, then clearly that would happen," Bednar said.

### Limitations of the study

As noted earlier, the sample size was small, 15 in 2009 and 18 in 2010, but because these are the best online sites as judged by the ACP we thought they provided a valid sample. In addition, we contacted the appropriate people at all of the websites and conducted phone interviews with closed and open ended questions. We were able to glean information from the interviews that we felt further mitigated concerns about the sample size.

Also as noted in the methodology section, there was one Pacemaker winner we were unable to gather data on. The Black & Magenta website at Muskingum University in New Concord, Ohio, was inoperative (we tried it on several occasions). We were also unable to reach the adviser despite repeated efforts by phone and email.

There is one other notable limitation, caused by the ACP's system of selecting Online Pacemaker winners. The websites are judged in March and April but the winners are not announced until late October. Because of that lag time, students who worked on the winning websites may have graduated and been replaced by students who may have made changes in the website after they were judged. Chances that there were major changes during that time however were probably minimal and we are confident that the websites we surveyed were essentially in the same condition as when the judges selected them as winners. There is no way around this limitation since we could not begin work until the winners were announced.

### Suggestions for future study

The online news world is changing at a rapid pace. For example, only a few years ago social media such as Twitter and Facebook were not a part of news media websites. Now, every site, including the student sites in our study, has links to its social media. Use of video by newspaper sites is also relatively new in the past few years, as are reporter blogs, RSS feeds and many other interactive features.

It would be interesting to repeat this study in the next couple of years to measure the changes in features and how student newspapers are using their websites. Repeating the study could also measure the changing CMS landscape. Finally, it would be worthwhile to see whether more colleges and universities abandon their printed newspapers in favor of online-only editions as costs escalate and student consumer habits continue to evolve.

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## 2009 ACP Pacemaker Winners

### *Four-year Daily Newspaper*

dennews.com, Eastern Illinois Univ., Charleston, Ill.  
iowastatedaily.com, Iowa State Univ., Ames, Iowa  
Kansan.com, Univ. of Kansas, Lawrence, Kan.  
KentNewsNet.com, Kent State Univ., Kent, Ohio  
OUDaily.com, Univ. of Oklahoma, Norman, Okla.

### *Four-year Non-daily Newspaper*

The Signal, Ouachita Baptist Univ., Arkadelphia, Ark.  
The Orion, California State Univ., Chico, Chico, Calif.  
The State Hornet, Sacramento State Univ., Sacramento, Calif.  
Golden Gate [X]press, San Francisco State Univ., San Francisco, Calif.  
The Circuit, Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa  
Tulane Hullabaloo, Tulane Univ., New Orleans, La.  
The Maneater, Univ. of Missouri, Columbia, Mo.  
The Whit Online, Rowan Univ., Glassboro, N.J.  
The Temple News, Temple Univ., Philadelphia, Pa.  
Whitworthian, Whitworth Univ., Spokane, Wash.

## 2010 ACP Pacemaker Winners

### *Large-school Newspaper*

The State Press, Arizona State Univ., Tempe, Ariz.  
UATRAV.COM, Univ. of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Ark.  
Mustang Daily, California Polytechnic State Univ., San Luis Obispo, Calif.  
gwhatchet.com, George Washington Univ., Washington, D.C.  
The Red & Black, Univ. of Georgia, Athens, Ga.  
The Daily Illini, Univ. of Illinois, Champaign, Ill.  
idsnews.com, Indiana Univ., Bloomington, Ind.  
Kansan.com, Univ. of Kansas, Lawrence, Kan.  
College Heights Herald, Western Kentucky Univ., Bowling Green, Ky.  
mndaily.com, Univ. of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minn.  
The Daily Targum, Rutgers Univ., New Brunswick, N.J.

### *Small-school Newspaper*

Mirror, Fairfield Univ., Fairfield, Conn.  
The Daily Northwestern, Northwestern Univ., Evanston, Ill.  
Lions' Roar Online, Normandale CC, Bloomington, Minn.  
The Ithacan Online, Ithaca College, Ithaca, N.Y.  
Black & Magenta, Muskingum Univ., New Concord, Ohio  
The Daily Gazette, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pa.  
The Phoenix, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pa.  
Megaphone, Southwestern Univ., Georgetown, Texas

*Online-only*

TommiMedia.com, Univ. of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minn.

**ACP Online Pacemaker Winners Study***Close-ended questions:*

- 1) University size:
- 2) Print circulation:
- 3) Frequency of print publication:
- 4) Number of majors in your department:
- 5) Does your school have a broadcast major/minor/sequence?
- 6) Convergence major/minor/sequence?
- 7) Number of total staff on newspaper:
- 8) Number of online-only staff:
- 9) Number of web/multimedia editors:
- 10) Credit granted for working on the website? (newspaper?)
- 11) Working on website required for major?
- 12) Total number of hits per month:
- 13) Unique visitors per month:
- 14) Is there a link from the college/university main page?
- 15) Is your site hosted on the institution's server or an independent server?
- 16) Yearly cost of the site (server space, domain name, etc):
- 17) Does university have a TV broadcast? If so, is there a separate website for TV?
- 18) Number of years site has been up:
- 19) Current CMS:
- 20) Number of years you've been with this CMS:
- 21) Prior CMS's used?

*Open-Ended/Likert-Scale Questions*

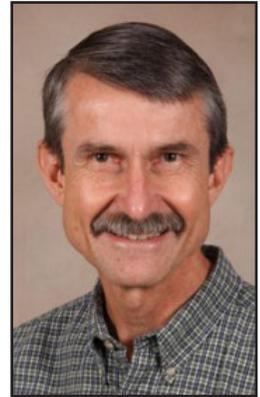
- 1) How often is website updated: (> once a day, daily, more than once a week, weekly, <weekly)
- 2) Pay of web personnel?
- 3) How/why did you choose your current CMS?
- 4) How satisfied are you with your CMS? (Not at all   Somewhat   Mostly satisfied   Very satisfied)
- 5) Are you considering switching CMS? If so, to what and why?
- 6) What are the advantages you see in your current CMS?
- 7) Disadvantages in your current CMS?
- 8) If not with College Publisher, why not?
- 9) Describe process/procedures/personnel for posting stories, graphics and MM to your website.
- 10) Describe your online site's cooperation with other campus media.
- 11) Future changes to site?
- 12) Do you post online only stories?
- 13) Other unique content?
- 14) Do you post stories before they are published in the print edition, after, or what?
- 15) Other things you would like to say about your website or CMS?

## About the Authors



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