

DELIVERING IRELAND

Journalism's Search for a Role Online

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Abstract / Much of the rhetoric surrounding new media has centred on their potential democratically to reform public communications through more diverse, more open and more accountable journalism and debate. This article details a study of Irish online news, based on observation of a variety of websites and on a series of interviews with journalists, to test whether this potential has begun to be realized and whether practitioners share such a vision. Enhancement of content, interactivity, immediacy, increased depth and new ways of telling stories are some of the possibilities that are present, or at least latent, in online news. But these possibilities are seldom or only partially brought to fruit. What emerges from observation of online news in action, and from discussions with those providing its content, is far from a revolution in media, but an expression of the cautious continuity, if not inertia, of media content and practice.

Keywords / content / interactivity / journalism / new media / online newspapers

Introduction

Does journalism have a new, distinct role in new media? The internet's potential to transform the face of public communications through interactive, collaborative, many-to-many exchange has been much talked of. But this discourse often bypasses the institutional and professional practices, opinions and culture of people in both 'old' and new media who must still engage in journalism, however it is evolving, whether because of changes in ICT or elsewhere.

This article looks at the development of online services by Irish newspapers, as well as the attitudes of practitioners, in the context of the public role of journalism and journalists. While recognizing that the evolution of online news is a continuing and complex process, it attempts to make some assessment of the impact of the internet on the delivery of news in and about Ireland, and of the attempts of news providers – mostly newspapers – in using the internet for journalistic ends.

In addition to reform of public communication, much discussion of the success or failure of internet media has been based on criteria relating to commercial viability. However startling early claims for the digital economy were, the trials of Irish new media entities at the beginning of the 21st century have been distinctly traditional, with cutbacks and layoffs the order of the day. At

the economic level, the impact of the internet for the most part has been felt in the pockets of traditional media. Journalists are usually happy to leave the spreadsheets of gloom to others while they get on with the job of interpreting the world, for good or ill, for their readers, but that is not to say that journalism should not look beyond the next deadline, and, while the economic viability of the new online entities is of critical importance, it is not the only aspect of viability that is of interest. Journalists should also consider whether new media imply a new or altered journalism.

The normative understandings, culture and practices of the so-called 'old' media profession (or craft) of journalism, with all its imperfections, frame and shape the news, even online. Journalism is, of course, an integral part of the much criticized traditional media organization, in that it is firmly premised on a few-to-many system of communication comprising specialist producers and a more or less passive audience (Williams, 1989). Cyber-utopian hopes for the democratic potential of many-to-many communication (Godwin, 1999) have been qualified (Slevin, 2000), or cast in doubt (Castells, 1996; Paracharissi, 2002; Poster, 1995), but even more critical perspectives have tended to omit the journalist, and the problems surrounding his or her role. Existing professional codes do not extend to explicit consideration of the Habermasian public sphere, but, as articulations of the public, democratic role of journalism, they clearly acknowledge, at least in aspiration, that there is more at stake here than profit or jobs.

The principal question that this article seeks to address, therefore, is whether relatively early experiences and interpretations of online journalism throw up evidence that the internet can extend, improve or even in some way reform journalism. Are we seeing the beginnings of a new order for a profession that has new ways to inform citizens and foster rational debate? Or, to put it in less deterministic terms, can journalists use the internet to perform their role better?

Methodology

The research is in two parts: an online survey looking at how Irish news has manifested itself on the web; and a series of individual interviews in which journalists were asked for their opinions and insights on how new media have changed or may change news.

Online Survey

First, I conducted a survey of online news sites (including some of broadcasting organizations that find that the internet has brought them into a new field of more direct competition with print publishers) with a view to assessing their adoption of internet features – in other words, to test how much they have incorporated features that seek to extend their journalism beyond the limits of established media. In all, the study covered 64 websites. While this represents a large proportion of news sites, it is not intended to be interpreted as a comprehensive view.

Sites observed were in the following categories:

- *National*: 10 sites maintained by national news outlets. Included in this group were the site of Irish state broadcaster Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ) and that of the *Sunday Times*, a British newspaper but with a well-developed Irish edition.
- *Regional*: 27 sites of individual regional and local newspapers, but also including <www.unison.ie>, the portal that, in addition to carrying the web edition of the *Irish Independent*, also offers, in a standard format, content from a large number of regionals. Regional newspapers are an important part of the Irish media landscape, particularly outside Dublin.
- *Expatriate and 'diaspora'*: eight sites aimed at Irish communities abroad, principally in the US and Britain.
- *Net*: 12 net-native sites, several of them associated with telcos. Includes Yahoo UK & Ireland.
- *Radio*: sites of two independent music stations that broadcast news bulletins.
- *Other*: some special interest newspapers or magazines which were found to be publishing websites.

Chinese authors Zhou He and Jian-Hua Zhu set out three models for online newspapers. These are transmission, interactive and fully-fledged community (He and Zhu, 2002). We can look at the most salient features of Irish news websites to help us decide to which group they belong. Broadly, sites have been surveyed to discover the degree to which they offer interactive features, such as hyperlinks and discussion boards, but we have also looked for characteristics of content that indicate an embracing of internet potentialities, such as more content, in the sense of additional or different types of content, more frequent updates, archives and searches.

It may be argued that publishers or web managers, rather than journalists, are likely to have made decisions relating to these features. However, such influence, also present in other media, relates to dynamics of media institutions that are beyond the scope of this article. Whether the decision-makers are considered journalists does not deflect from the fact that these are journalistic options.

Interviews

The second part of the research is a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews with Irish journalists – some well-known and some known only to other practitioners; technical and non-technical; online and in traditional media; front-line and backroom; reporters and editors. These interviews seek to find out what issues related to new media are of most interest and concern to journalists, and whether journalists see the internet as relevant to and perhaps changing their role or roles.

Fifteen journalists were interviewed (see Appendix), and they belonged to the following (sometimes overlapping) categories:

- Editors concerned with the online operation of print or broadcast media;
- National print press journalists, including a columnist and a technology specialist;
- Those managing, editing or writing for online-only news outlets, including aggregators and re-publishers of syndicated material;
- Regional print press journalists.

It is important to note here that the group is not large enough to draw meaningful distinctions between the expressed perceptions of subgroups. While it is fair to say that online and technology journalists had, crudely measured, a more 'pro-internet' outlook, and print-only journalists tended to be more sceptical, this certainly was not exclusively the case, and there were several striking instances of the opposite. In any case, it is probably not meaningful to attempt to divine differences of opinion between 'online' and 'offline' journalists, except where this pattern was very evident. Most of the journalists interviewed could be seen, in some way, either in their current or previous roles, as having a foot in both camps.

In the period of retrenchment since the original research, carried out towards the end of 2000, there has been little significant development in Irish news online, except perhaps in the extension of breaking news and news briefs services on mobile media. This may in itself serve as a commentary on the realization, or lack of it, of the net's potential. As might be anticipated, there has also been a lot of flux among smaller net-native entities, and some of these have been subsumed into other services or have ceased to operate.

The Shape of Net News

Figures for the internet population in the Republic of Ireland in April 2002 show that 34 percent of households had access to the net (Office of the Director of Telecommunications Regulations, 2002), representing a roughly median rate in international comparisons. An online poll carried out in June 2000 found that news outlets ranked second highest, at 64 percent, behind search engines, at 82 percent, among sites most frequently visited by Irish users (Amárach Consulting, 2000).

Statistics based on page impressions (hits) per month of Irish sites bore out the appeal of news services, with a heavy presence of news providers in the top 10 (Newmedialive, 2001). By far the most dominant news site was <ireland.com>, portal of *The Irish Times* newspaper, at 24,658,379 hits, and this dominance may reflect the early migration of the newspaper onto the web. Lagging considerably behind was *Unison* <www.unison.ie>, portal of the largest print circulation daily newspaper, the *Irish Independent*, at 5,622,882. A significant consideration here is the distinction drawn between hits originating abroad and those from users in Ireland: two-thirds of <ireland.com>'s hits were said to have come from abroad. This demographic, perhaps, is one of the special factors shaping Irish online offerings (for example, <ireland.com> provides a genealogy service that helps in tracing Irish ancestors). Of the top 10 sites, five were news sites maintained by established media. This group

comprised four newspapers, (including one in Northern Ireland, as this is an all-Ireland ranking) and RTÉ.

Established news media, clearly, have an important presence in the internet arena in Ireland. But does it work the other way? Do the news media embrace internet attributes such as interactivity and archivity? We can glibly conclude that the internet has already brought an increase in news. In other words, there are, at least apparently, new news outlets and new types of news outlets maintained by existing and new providers. But the question that we attempt to address here is whether there is evidence that this seeming plethora of options for the audience represents a real increase in the reach, breadth, depth and diversity of journalistic activity or of public discourse generally. Nor can we assume that merely having new features enabled by technology necessarily implies a commitment to such enhancements, on the part of either journalists or publishers.

Remediation of news in new media is a common technique used by non-news organizations to provide their audiences with cheap, often free to publish, content. *Unison* or the *Irish Examiner* online <www.irishexaminer.com> have been happy to provide news feeds to other sites, so long as they retain a link to their own. In the main, this content has largely been produced for print in the first instance. And so, few of the new outlets have been original generators of news or public affairs content. Some, especially ISP websites, e.g. *Indigo* and *Ireland Online*, have been modelled as portals and have reproduced news feeds from established media as elements in arrays of content. Others, such as *Local Ireland* or the *Irish Emigrant* (an email newsletter), have functioned as aggregators – sampling, prioritizing, contextualizing and condensing stories for readers.

In order to analyse how the new online entities provide, or do not provide, new or extended dimensions in news, I have split them for presentation purposes into two groups: one (Table 1) based on services associated with traditional, domestic media organizations, both national and regional, the other (Table 2) relating to purely online (net) services, services aimed at the Irish expatriates, local radio-related and ‘other’. What follows is a necessarily brief outline of the patterns observed in the snapshot.

Content

Sites which did not provide their own news, but which imported news feeds from an outside source or sources, were classified as having partial content. Overall, the test as to whether a site provided ‘full’ or partial content necessarily was applied in relative terms – a regional title would qualify with less content than the site of a national newspaper. News feed refers to the provision of a continuously or frequently updated breaking news panel, often syndicated. In contrast, aggregation refers to the editing and representation of information from other media sources or already in the public domain, sometimes with hyperlinks to those sources. A good example here is the news offering on *Doras* (since defunct).

The skewed distribution of ‘full’ content offerings indicates that it was ‘old’

TABLE 1

Online Properties in National and Regional/Local Media

	Links	Content	Journalist Emails	Discussion Areas	Opinion Polls	Update Frequency	Multimedia	Expansion of Content	Depth Reports	News Feed	Syndication	Aggregation	Production Standards	Email Story Forwarding	Print-friendly Versions	Email Edition	Archive	Search	Personalization
National																			
<i>The Irish Examiner</i>		Full		Yes (+chat)		Daily		Yes					Intermed.				Yes	Yes	
<i>Ireland on Sunday</i>		Full				Weekly							Intermed.					Yes	
<i>Irish Independent</i>		Full				Daily							Basic				Yes		
<i>Irish News</i>		Full				Daily	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			Advanced			Yes	Yes	Yes	
<i>ireland.com</i>		Full	Some	Yes	Yes	Daily	Some	Yes	Yes	Yes			Advanced					Yes	
<i>Sunday Business Post</i>		Full				Daily		Yes	Yes				Advanced			Yes		Yes	
<i>RTÉ News</i>	Yes	Full				Contin.	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes		Advanced				Yes		
<i>Belfast Telegraph</i>		Full	Yes	Yes		Daily		Yes	Yes				Advanced				Yes	Yes	
<i>TG4</i>		Partial				Daily							Intermed.					Yes	
<i>Sunday Times</i>		Partial	Some			Weekly				Yes			Advanced				Yes	Yes	
Regional/local																			
<i>Unison</i>		Full				Daily				Yes	Yes	Advanced	Yes				Yes	Yes	
<i>The Clare Champion</i>		Full				Weekly							Basic				Yes		
<i>The Connaught Telegraph</i>		Sample											Basic				Yes	Yes	
<i>Derry People & Donegal News</i>		Full				Weekly							Intermed.						
<i>Galway Advertiser</i>		Full	Some	Notices		Daily							Intermed.	Yes			Yes	Yes	
<i>Irish Times</i>		Partial				Weekly							Intermed.						
<i>Kerry's Eye</i>		Partial				Weekly							Intermed.						

TABLE 1

Continued

	Links	Content	Journalist Emails	Discussion Areas	Opinion Polls	Update Frequency	Multimedia	Expansion of Content	Depth Reports	News Feed	Syndication	Aggregation	Production Standards	Email Story Forwarding	Print-friendly Versions	Email Edition	Archive	Search	Personalization
<i>Nationalist & Leinster Times</i>		Promo																	
<i>Limerick Leader</i>		Full				Weekly						Basic					Yes	Yes	
<i>Limerick Post</i>		Full		Notices	Yes	Daily				Yes		Advanced	Yes					Yes	
<i>Mayo Gazette</i>		Partial		Contacts		Biweekly						Basic				Yes	Yes		
<i>Munster Express</i>		Full	Yes			Weekly		Yes				Intermed.					Yes	Yes	
<i>N. People & S. People</i>		Full				Weekly						Intermed.						Yes	
<i>People Newspapers</i>		Partial				Weekly						Basic					Yes		
<i>Waterford Today</i>		Full				Weekly						Advanced					Yes		
<i>Mayo News</i>		Full				Weekly						Intermed.						Yes	
<i>Roscommon Champion</i>		Partial				Occas.						Basic							
<i>Tirconail Tribune</i>		Full				Weekly						Basic							
<i>Kerryman</i>		Full				Weekly						Basic					Yes		
<i>Kilkenny People</i>		Full		Yes	Yes	Weekly				World	Yes	Advanced	Yes					Yes	Yes
<i>Tipperary Star</i>		Full				Weekly						Advanced						Yes	Yes
<i>Clonmel Nationalist</i>		Full				Weekly						Advanced						Yes	Yes
<i>Unison</i>		Full				Daily				Yes	Yes	Advanced	Yes				Yes	Yes	
<i>Western People</i>	Yes	Full				Weekly						Basic					Yes		
<i>Connacht Tribune</i>		Partial				Weekly						Basic							
<i>The Kingdom</i>		Full				Weekly						Basic							
<i>Sligo Weekender</i>		Full	Yes			Weekly						Basic					Yes	Yes	

TABLE 2

Online Properties in Expat., Net-Only, Radio-Related and Other Media

	Links	Content	Journalist Emails	Discussion Areas	Opinion Polls	Update Frequency	Multimedia	Expansion of Content	Depth Reports	News Feed	Syndication	Aggregation	Production Standards	Email Story Forwarding	Print-friendly Versions	Email Edition	Archive	Search	Personalization
Expat. and Diaspora																			
<i>Emigrant</i>		Full				Daily		Yes			Yes	Basic				Yes	Yes		
<i>Irish Voice</i>		Full	Some			Weekly						Basic							
<i>Irish Echo</i>		Partial				Weekly						Basic				Yes			
<i>Irish World</i>		Partial				Weekly						Basic							
<i>irelandclick.com</i>		Full		Guestbook	Yes	Daily		Yes	Yes			Advanced	Yes						Yes
<i>Irish Herald</i>		Sample																	
<i>Irish Post</i>		Full				Weekly		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Advanced					Yes	Yes	
<i>Irish-American Info. Service</i>		Partial				Daily				Yes	Yes	Basic					Yes		
Net																			
<i>online.ie</i>		Full	Yes	Yes	Yes	Daily		Yes		Yes	Yes	Advanced	Yes	Yes	Yes				
<i>Local Ireland</i>		Full	Yes			Daily					Yes	Advanced							Yes
<i>Ireland Today</i>		Agg., feats	Active	Occas.	Yes	Daily		Yes		Yes		Interm.				Yes	Yes		
<i>netgains</i>		Full									Yes	Raw text				Yes			
<i>oceanfree.net</i>		Partial	Chat only			Contin.				Yes	Yes	Advanced							
<i>Ireland On-Line</i>		Partial	Chat only			Contin.				Yes	Yes	Advanced							
<i>Indigo</i>		Partial				Daily					Yes	Advanced							
<i>Doras</i>		Partial				Contin.				Yes		Advanced							
<i>Electric News</i>		Full	Yes			Contin.				Yes	Yes	Advanced	Yes	Yes			Yes	Yes	

TABLE 2

Continued

	Links	Content	Journalist Emails	Discussion Areas	Opinion Polls	Update Frequency	Multimedia	Expansion of Content	Depth Reports	News Feed	Syndication	Aggregation	Production Standards	Email Story Forwarding	Print-friendly Versions	Email Edition	Archive	Search	Personalization
<i>Newshound</i>		Partial				Daily							Basic			Yes	Yes		
<i>Digfone Online</i>		Partial				Daily					Yes	Yes	Advanced						
<i>Yahoo!</i>		Full			Active	Daily				Brit.	Yes	Yes	Basic	Yes					Yes
Radio																			
<i>9Sfm</i>		Partial		Yes		Contin.	Audio			Yes			Advanced						Yes*
<i>fm104</i>		Partial				2 x day							Interm.						
Other																			
<i>An Phoblacht/Republican News</i>		Full		Active		Weekly							Basic			Yes	Yes	Yes	
<i>Foinse</i>		Full				Weekly							Basic						
<i>Irish Farmers Journal</i>		Full		Suspend.		Weekly							Interm.					Yes	
<i>Hack Watch News</i>	Yes	Partial				Variable							Interm.						
<i>Phoenix</i>		Partial				Fortnt.							Basic				Yes		

media, nationally and regionally, that were providing the most relevant news content on the internet, and that online news depended for its content on remediation of offline texts. For others, news (most commonly a news feed) was but one element in a mix of material often dominated by ‘lifestyles’ and entertainment content, or had been included as the sole dynamic element in otherwise static pages.

The use of syndicated material and of aggregation of other media content was most marked in the net-native category. These sites provided little journalism other than the presentation of existing content in different contexts and formats. So, traditional national media dominance of the new arena was seen to be even stronger than might be assumed at first glance; or, put another way, online publishing could be seen to enhance rather than challenge or dissipate the reach of mainstream media. Conversely, the online outlets of traditional media made markedly little use of syndication or aggregation, despite the potential of such a policy for adding to their sites and erasing much of the advantage of new online entities. It could be argued, for example, that there is no reason why a provincial newspaper should not also use its website to provide national, international or specialist content, or a gateway to such content, but none did.

New Content

In addition to a general expansion of content over and above that carried in the traditional media partner of a particular web entity, I sought to identify sites that provided ‘in-depth’ reports – the specific provision of background, contextualizing or summarizing features that expand on raw news in a way not technically or editorially feasible in print.

Both general expansion and the provision of in-depth reports in particular could be seen primarily to have been a feature of the national traditional media. However, the difference should not be overstated. In most cases, additional in-depth reports were few and they appeared to be seldom replaced or updated. The regional press was particularly inactive in generating internet-specific content: this may reflect the ‘local notes’ nature of regional publishing, but is also related to the fact that many regionals provided an automated uploading of content to the *Unison* database.

Frequency

Limited movement could be seen from discrete print editions towards more frequent updates and, beyond that, to a continuous or ‘wire’ model, but the pattern of editions was firmly rooted in print or broadcast legacy. However, it is potentially misleading to impose an update frequency classification on websites that bend previously fixed edition or bulletin schedules. Many sites carry news feeds as well as regular updates. Where the breaking news element formed a significant proportion of total content, such a site might rightly be considered continuously updated, even if it still nominally adhered, as most mature media sites did, to the legacy of separate editions. There was a much

greater preponderance of continuously updated sites among the net-native sites, but this also reflected their heavy reliance on bought-in news feeds.

Many websites of regional newspapers, most of which are weeklies, gave no clue to the uninitiated online reader as to the frequency of update. Often, no online edition date was provided, and the time frame would have to be guessed by reference to dates in the archive, if one was provided. It was usually the case that these websites followed the schedules of print editions.

Production Standards

This assessment refers to the design and technical level of the site. An advanced rating does not necessarily imply that a site is graphic or multimedia-rich: for example, <ireland.com> could be regarded as a graphically modest site, but it remains an advanced entity in terms of its deliberate design and the variety and complexity of its offerings. What this variable attempts to establish, at a quite basic level, is whether the site as presented displays strong adherence to a web format. While this is a necessarily crude measure, it is readily apparent whether the website has been approached with full commitment to web format, often as part of an automated system, or has been cut and pasted in a less planned or less resourced way.

Most, but certainly not all, of the national news organizations' sites showed advanced production values. However, the website of the biggest-selling daily, the *Irish Independent*, appeared quite basic, with little effort apparent in adapting print content for reading on-screen. But perhaps most striking here was the basic standard that tended to apply in many regional newspapers outside the *Unison* fold and also in sites aimed at audiences abroad.

Interactivity

Across the range, the almost complete absence of links within stories was remarkable. It may be that consideration of the resources required to research links, as well as the perceived risk of directing readers away from one's own site, held sway, with only two of the titles observed using links with any consistency, and both of these belonging to 'traditional' media categories. Certainly, there was no attempt to emulate the links policies of major international online news providers, such as *The Guardian's News Unlimited*.

Other interactive elements were similarly muted. Online opinion polls were less common than might be expected, even in view of their acknowledged limitations (<ireland.com> stressed that the feature was not a serious attempt to gauge public mood). Full-blooded message boards, or forums, where most meaningful reader-to-reader and reader-to-publication discussion can occur, were also rare, with only three of the 10 national news providers carrying one, and only 10 instances of message boards out of a potential 64. What is not apparent from a static reading is that some ISPs had already removed them where they had previously been carried. Again, it may be that the cost of policing and monitoring such open forums, necessitated by fear of defamation suits, discouraged their establishment and hastened their removal or demotion

to less prominent locations within websites, which subsequently appeared to be the case at <ireland.com>. Nevertheless, where they have occurred – in particular at <ireland.com>, the *Belfast Telegraph* and <online.ie> – they were found to be vibrant and relevant, with high-quality contributions. One newspaper site, that of the *Irish Examiner*, also supported a chat function.

Archive and Search

‘Archive’ here denotes the provision of dated back-issues, while ‘search’ refers to the ability to search archives by keyword, and not to simpler site or wider internet searches found on many websites. Related features (because they aid navigation and facilitate searches for information) are the site map and site index, but these were relatively rare.

The common provision of archives and searches contrasted with the poor uptake of other online features, perhaps reflecting the reality of their being already embedded in the libraries, content resources and research needs of traditional media. It might be seen that the only new challenge here is a technical one: while existing media whose organizations historically have provided archives and record systems, if only in the form of physical files and microfiche, were strong in this regard, purely new media entities tended to publish and forget: *Electric News* emerged as the sole net-native provider of archive material.

Additional Formats: Forwarding, Printing, Email Editions

Email forwarding and print-friendly versions are easily implemented features that add to the reach of the medium, so their presence might be viewed as an indicator of the degree to which publishers think of the internet as a different, format-flexible platform, rather than as a simple extension of print. But these features were largely omitted. As in the case of production standards, it could be speculated that the failure to adopt these simple techniques could be linked to a lack of technical awareness or of resources.

As observed, Irish newspapers online, and Irish online news in general, match most of the criteria – information delivery, few feedback channels, news service only, no or minimum searching capability, no links to other services, little content other than what is available in print – for inclusion, in He and Zhu’s (2002) terms, in the transmission group: that is, with the least developed internet strategy. As news has moved online, it has maintained its most essential characteristics, unswayed by the perceived potential of the internet.

Journalists Discuss Online News

Working as a journalist, I had often been struck by my colleagues’ differences of opinion as to the capacity of the internet to benefit journalism and, perhaps, journalists. While a few were enthused by the day-to-day advantages of new online tools, some journalists were deeply sceptical of the potential, democratic and otherwise, of the net as far as it related to their work, while others seemed

not to care whether their work appeared in online editions. Indeed, many journalists seemed simply not to be aware or else not to care about the net as a platform for more or better journalism. At the content level, the ambivalence of journalists towards the emerging online universe has been reflected in the narrow range of negative internet-related stories, such as crime, pornography, or threats to personal security online, that newspapers have tended to cover (Grossman, 1999).

It is fair to say that journalists may have strong reasons not to share the hopes for the reform of public communication that have been evinced by the champions of cyberspace (Levinson, 1997). Even if they have never experienced for themselves the dearth of quality debate on some bulletin boards and in chat rooms (Schultz, 2000), they have seen enough of unpublished or unpublishable letters to the editor to develop a jaundiced take on the notion of transformed, open media.

Do journalists share, however specifically or vaguely, the idea that a new media system might evolve that essentially redefines their role? Or do the classic gatekeepers hold the view that, however free it may be, the exchange of ideas does indeed demand moderation, filtering and interpretation? We are asking here not merely whether journalists approve of interactivity, but what they think its implementation in new media will bring to public communication, to actual content and its formats, and to professional practice. The journalists interviewed here are briefly profiled in the Appendix and, in order to focus the discussion, are not individually named in the reporting of their contributions, unless their identity is especially relevant.

Interactivity

During the interviews, discussion of interactivity centred on the possibilities for email communication with journalists, message boards and hyperlinking. Although there were some instances where journalists argued that they needed to maintain distance from the audience, in nearly all cases these possible features were seen as 'a good thing', but there was a wide range of opinion as to their meaning and role.

Email

Almost all journalists interviewed said that they regarded positively the inclusion of journalists' email addresses in online and offline media. However, differences emerged over whether journalists should regard themselves as being obliged to correspond individually with readers by this means, or whether a central gateway for email feedback should be operated, facilitating management of responses.

Email in particular was welcomed by many interviewees as a positive addition to communication with readers, more immediate and more convenient than 'Letters to the Editor'. One interviewee expressed her openness towards interaction with readers thus: 'To say that people shouldn't be able to contact you just goes against everything that journalism is about.' Another, a new media

journalist with a print background, distinguished between two possible types of interactivity, saying, 'It's not so much a loop of reader talking to writer or publisher as reader talking to other reader.' He also related developments online to more general developments: as journalism increasingly blurred the boundaries between news and comment, external input was more necessary: 'The more you let the reader into the loop the more you're likely to get to [the] truth.'

One leading national columnist said that the question of interactivity went to the heart of journalism and its values, especially as it related to the notion of journalistic objectivity. He said that no one believed that journalists were 'not involved in a process of very sharp value judgements being made all the time'. Response via the internet was therefore an important part of forming the journalist's process of seeking the truth. 'There is an engagement. It is a two-way process.' He said he received, via email, a high volume of response to his work, and that much of it was well informed.

A journalist working for <ireland.com>, who had previously worked for *The Irish Times*, said that there was far more interaction with readers by online journalists, although he did not give specific examples of how this happened. A more instrumental view was put forward by a respondent working for a net-native publication, who said that email feedback was essential to defining who the audience was, especially as catering too much to readers in the US might alienate those in Ireland: 'You will have no standing and you will not be taken seriously as a reputable news provider.'

One of the regional newspaper editors' responses raised the need for reporters and editors in small communities deliberately to keep the audience at arm's length. She said she did not publish email addresses of reporters and would have to consult journalists before changing the practice. She normally dealt with complaints and 'I don't like putting journalists in the position where they have to answer [to readers].' This, she said, was a decision for the individual journalist. Responding to emails was the newspaper's, as distinct from the journalist's, responsibility. Another regional editor said that some degree of aloofness from the readership was required. Echoing the idea that responding directly to readers was a step beyond the role of the journalist, and pointing to the economic constraints on what new media could do, an online editor said that, while she was in favour of giving writers' addresses, she had, 'for their [the writers'] sake', chosen not to do so. Because they were freelancers, they were paid only to write an article, 'not to follow up emails after it'.

Discussion Areas

Forums were treated with some caution. The expansion of expression by means of message boards or other technical facilities elicited several responses emphasizing the risks, beyond the legal, of such freedoms. A political correspondent said: 'The notion that readers or other net users get the same sort of platform as the original news story would obviously be very dangerous ground.' Feedback, which was also part of the print journalist's experience, was useful 'but the notion of it becoming part of the story itself – I think that's a very dangerous road to go down.' Two others referred to such interactivity as 'noise'.

One of these, a journalist publishing a net-native entity, said, 'If you hand the microphone to the rabble then noise-to-signal goes way up.'

Scepticism towards the internet as a medium facilitating greater democracy was strongly expressed by a journalist charged with producing RTÉ's online news content. He commented that the notion of 'electronic town halls' was 'a bit Swiss – everyone voting every couple of weeks – I don't think that's going to happen in Ireland!'

But not everyone one was so dismissive. One journalist commented: 'If knowledge is power then the capacity of individuals to access that power does have the potential to make a contribution to the kind of politics that I would like to see emerging – participative politics.' He said he believed this despite the problems of access and the internet's equal openness to 'lunatics and nutcases and propaganda', because 'I don't think that people are stupid'. He added that, if necessary, a journalist might spend one day a week dealing with correspondence or taking part in a discussion group. 'I don't think we can go on culturally putting ourselves forward as the arbiters of accountability and not being accountable ourselves.' Now that the channel was available in the new medium, the expectation among readers was increasingly going to be 'If you can tell me your views, I can tell you mine.'

This was an exceptional viewpoint, and most interviewees took a more conservative approach. It was revealing that, for example, when asked how the internet might differ from broadcast and print, most referred to the shape and timing of content (see later) rather than to interactivity or any fundamental shift from the one or few-to-many model of established media. While a few expressed an interest in interactivity as an aid or add-on to the main business or journalism, the overwhelming sense of journalists' take on the subject was very much 'business as usual'.

Hyperlinks

Most journalists, explicitly asked for an opinion on hyperlinks, responded with enthusiasm. However, few volunteered this view unprompted, and none made a sustained argument that they were essential or fundamental to news in new media. Typical responses in this positive vein were those of the journalist who said, 'They're the beauty of the internet', and another who described them as a 'battleground for eyeballs'. Another interviewee emphatically rejected as 'hogwash' the idea that hypertext fundamentally changed the nature of the relationship between writer and reader: 'You're only helping the reader.' This was a striking expression of a strong thread in journalists' responses: while various internet features were to be welcomed, few saw them as changing the communication system at its root. Interestingly, none of the interviewees described hyperlinks as an interactive feature. Perhaps representative of many of the comments was one by an internet journalist who said, simply: 'There should be more links on <ireland.com>.'

Specific worries were expressed about the potential for links to direct readers away from the site, although no one proposed a solution to this problem. Pressed on policy regarding controversial links, e.g. to paramilitary or hate

groups, most interviewees tended to favour an approach of treating each case on merit, but a few felt that a consistent policy needed to be adopted. By not putting in a pointer to an objectionable site ‘you’re censoring the story’, said one interviewee, who added that those decisions should be made, ‘as you go along. They wouldn’t all be perfect but they would follow some sort of ethical standard in your own head, I guess.’ Another print editorial executive and former internet edition editor said that, although providing links to questionable websites was a worry, there was no guiding policy. ‘It’s something you have to be careful with ... I don’t think there is a formula really.’ But another interviewee said news providers had to take editorial responsibility for links. Therefore, he said, he was uncomfortable with the notion of ad hoc decisions in this regard. However, until some sort of consensus was developed on the question, he added, ‘my tendency would be towards a more minimal approach’.

Only one journalist volunteered an opinion – ‘Manna from heaven!’ – on hyperlinks as a research tool, and no opinions were expressed that distinguished between different types of hyperlinks – those within a site and those pointing elsewhere, or in-text vs links placed outside stories.

In general, while interactive features were broadly welcomed, interviewees showed little commitment to embracing them as an important part of journalism. While one or two advanced arguments that saw interactivity and reader feedback as important democratic enhancements of the role of the press, and others explicitly dismissed the idea, most were happy to take a middle line, broadly welcoming interactive features as additional, ‘bolt-on’, enhancements of mainstream journalism but certainly not seeing them as changing anything in a fundamental way.

Content: Diversity and Format

Extended Coverage

Many in the group said that new media on the net could provide more diversity, but at the same time interviewees stressed the continuity of existing media. In particular, rather than foreseeing a challenge to established media by new entrants, several saw niche publishing, whether by geographic locality or subject area, as providing a more viable online strategy. Some of the observations that alluded to niching also related to the international dimension in Irish online publishing, a clear instance being the *Irish Emigrant* email newsletter but also important in the case of established media’s online operations. One regional editor/publisher pointed to this tension between potential audiences, saying that online journalism’s role would depend ‘on whether we pitch the online stuff for a foreign audience or Irish people abroad, or whether we want to include local people, and I’d say we won’t want to include local people for the obvious reason that it might affect [print] sales’. However, he said experience elsewhere appeared to indicate that the internet would not have a negative effect. He said that he ‘hadn’t a clue’ about the size of his newspaper’s online audience. In a comment that articulated the opinion of several journalists whose work catered in whole or in part for readers abroad, he said that,

at this early stage, 'we're just happy we have a site for people around the world'.

The net had encouraged, or would encourage, new entrants who would provide more diversity, some specialized but also some 'incredibly opinionated', according to the publisher and editor of a domestic email newsletter. The prospect of bypassing traditional media and their claim of objective journalism was echoed by another email publisher, who said, 'I can put this out without having to get the imprimatur of *The Irish Times* or the *Irish Independent*.' However, the idea that dominant players could be challenged was a minority one, and the same respondent commented separately that 'people with names and people with money' would prevail. 'So, for someone who has a view and wants to get it heard, it's going to be as hard to get it heard on the internet in the long run as it is in today's newspapers.'

This comment reflected the stronger sentiment that, rather than providing many new content options for audiences, the internet would come to represent a platform for expansion by established media. Many of the journalists interpreted new media potential in terms of competition between new entrants and existing media, with the latter retaining their dominance. One print reporter said that the net would not take over, if that were the expectation. 'People are always going to want to have the feel of newsprint in their hand.' The internet would never be the sole medium 'by which people tap into journalism'. A national newspaper journalist said the internet would take on the characteristics of a mass market. He said his newspaper was 'an upmarket, authoritative source', and 'we have to find some way of translating that onto the internet'.

The competitive advantage enjoyed by established media was similarly recognized by a net-native editor, who said websites of any kind had to have 'a massive budget for marketing to be heard above the noise'. But, he said, the higher profile of mainstream entities did not take away from the value of online publications aimed at communities that would seek them out. Another online editor said that competing with offline content would be problematic, even for established media organizations. 'They're voracious, these sites . . . it's exceptionally difficult for offline properties to create an online version that maintains the same standards . . . because they cannot just take the same journalists and double-job them . . . they have created a huge act for themselves to follow.'

Slow acceptance of the role of online journalism was seen as an obstacle by a net enthusiast. Online journalists sometimes experienced difficulty on a 'trivial level' when it came to acceptance and accreditation for events, and 'serious' online journals such as <Salon.com> had not been credited with breaking important stories. Limited access to the internet was also seen as acting as a brake on the relevance of new media. In the words of one political reporter: 'Until the net goes into every household and becomes more a part of everyone's life . . . it's not the powerful tool in the game that *The Irish Times* or the Indo [*Irish Independent*] or the *Examiner* currently are.'

While relatively few identified the internet's technically unlimited capacity for content as providing an opportunity for additional services, it is perhaps significant that each of the three interviewees who did so were in editorial management roles. These journalists were much more likely to view online

publishing as a platform for commercial expansion. One interviewee offered the opinion that, rather than seeking out new opportunities, with new content, formats and audiences, newspapers had acted out of fear in moving online.

Format

The perceived superiority of internet news formats was raised by a significant number of interviewees, in terms of facility for archiving, and for threading story development in a way that had not been practicable, except in the most condensed way, in traditional media. The permanence and accessibility of online records were also referred to by those who raised the issues of readers' new-found ability easily to view objective or unmediated source data, and as a factor in establishing media accountability. But one regional print journalist pointed to a potential paradox, saying that the new facility to publish to a wider, international audience could have a stifling effect on publication, for fear of defamation claims being inflated by the wider distribution of a contentious story.

Is online journalism a 'multimedia' phenomenon or is it a text-centred variation of print publishing and broadcast? There was a high response favouring the conceptualization of journalism online as remaining in the realm of text, essentially as an extension or modification, albeit sometimes dramatic, of print. Although one online journalist foresaw newspaper sites providing video and audio reports, few rated multimedia enhancement as a significant contributor to journalistic worth.

Immediacy was seen as a defining characteristic of online content. One respondent described it as 'the big thing'; another said the net had 'the immediacy of news and the longevity of print'; and another said that frequent updates were 'the great strength of online media'. However, several interviewees pointed to difficulties with breaking news, one warning that it created unrealistic expectations in a small country: 'That's been a gimmick and a disaster for most Irish sites. . . . The idea of having loads and loads of [Irish] news throughout the day maybe is a myth.' Another observed that agreements to sell syndicated stories to clients such as Yahoo! created similarly artificial pressures. The same interviewee raised the related problem of layout and the need for active editorial intervention, when she said that the prioritization of stories needed to be addressed: 'Very often on the bigger sites the priority is the last updated story. So you could end up at the top of the list with this really crap story. So you need to have somebody to say, "No, that can't be there."'

In summary, while journalists showed some appreciation for the potential of the internet to foster content diversity, they also held the view that existing, mainstream media structures would remain intact. Similarly, while recognizing advantages such as speed and archivity, most favoured continuity over a radical break with previous content formats.

Professional Matters: Standards and Skills

Interviewees linked ideas of trust and credibility with standards, skills and training. The question of trust in media arose in the context of information overload, which interviewees believed would cause people to seek out established and reliable media operating to professional norms. The role of journalists as navigators of a sea of data would thus be enhanced, rather than diminished, confirming the emphasis on the continued function of gatekeeping that has been noted elsewhere (Singer, 1997). Within that set, some of the respondents saw the emphasis in the role of journalists shifting from providing information (e.g. hard or headline news) to providing order, interpretation or identification with a particular, even partisan, perspective.

One print columnist volunteered a view that anticipated a radical transformation, far from the function of reporting straight news: 'We're fighting for relevance. We're fighting for the notion that what we do still matters and that . . . we are providing a practice of using information which is grounded in some kind of integrity, in a set of rules and structures which we are happy to account for.' By removing the need simply to report events in an ostensibly objective way, new media would remove the mystique of journalism and 'place a premium on journalists' intelligence' so that they could provide meaning. 'What [online journalism] does is it allows readers access to a lot of your documentary sources.' Verbatim transcripts of parliamentary committees or high-profile trials already were available to interested readers, and were linked from the newspaper. This was 'both bracing and liberating'. It was a very important check on the journalist, who previously enjoyed privileged access to information and whose reports 'were inevitably influenced by our own perceptions', but it meant that the journalist would be free to spend time more productively, thinking about and interpreting events and issues.

However, this radical perspective represented an exceptional judgement, at odds with most of the opinion expressed. The clearest articulation of the non-sense, pragmatic approach of many journalists, grounded in traditional editorial culture, came from a newspaper print and online editor who said: 'Everyone who works for a newspaper is governed by the policy of that newspaper, policy being set by the editor . . . so it's not really anything to do with democracy, and the internet doesn't make that any different.'

Much of this strand related to doubts over standards in online journalism, in particular the poor appreciation of some sites of the demands of editorial functions, and the problems made apparent by the propensity of new media to recruit inexperienced journalists on low pay. Such sentiments resonated with those already registered by journalists who had moved into new media elsewhere (Houston, 1999).

More than any other issue raised, most of the journalists had strong or unambiguous opinions on the question of skills. One print and online editor said too much was being made of the novelty of online news, adding, 'I think it's just a new medium; I don't think it creates new issues.' While the demands of immediacy created dangers, this was not unique to net news. Time pressures and pressures on accuracy were found in other media. However, the newspaper

would also have to find new ways to write about events ‘in a colourful or witty or engaging way or in a way that takes an angle on them so that it isn’t just straight Who, What, Why, Where and How.’ Another print and online editor said of the need to meet tight deadlines: ‘You do that online or offline.’

But most of those interviewed were concerned that the quality of journalism might be lowered. One online editor said editorial standards could suffer through the recruitment, principally ‘because they understand this computer business’, of younger, more technically aware but less journalistically experienced people. Another, also an online editor, said online journalists did not cover news ‘first-time’. They were more like selectors and editors and were challenged in the sense that they had to convey the story in a shorter format. There was also pressure to generate revenue and this could put constraints on content and raised the prospect of ‘advertorial’.

The divergence of opinion, between those who worried about standards and those taking a more sanguine approach, roughly corresponded to the online/offline divide, insofar as it existed. Those with print editorial backgrounds tended to dismiss fears based on time pressures and age profiles, but those with online-only experience tended to emphasize the risks. Another interviewee described as a ‘weakness’ the influx of ‘young people with very little experience of real world journalism finding that new media allow them [in]’. Too many older journalists were terrified of new media, she said.

But there was near unanimity on an endorsement of the role of traditional journalists, an idea that was put forward with some force. Some interviewees offered acknowledgement of the need for technical skills, but most emphasized the need for ‘old-fashioned’ journalistic skills. Age also featured in many of the discussions: sometimes it was seen as being related to technical ability, but it was also linked to a perceived tendency of online entities to hire less experienced editorial staff for jobs that might not have been as ‘journalistic’ as expected. One of the younger, online-only journalists, who observed that she and her colleagues found little room for creativity and self-expression, said: ‘You’re not recreating the wheel here. You’re trying to put it all in one place and represent it as objectively as possible. I think people are discovering now that there seems to be that boredom factor for online journalists . . . they realize it’s not what they thought it was . . . I think they probably need to come up with another word for it . . . you’re a content producer.’

This sense of the journalist as an information manager was also present in the comment by a regional editor that journalists needed to be better trained in order to keep control of content. Journalists drew a clear distinction between the roles of reporters and subeditors or between researching and writing. One reporter said, ‘The same skills are required: you have to know how to get a story – how to research it, how to present it – and you tweak those skills slightly for whichever medium you’re working for. But a good magazine journalist is a good newspaper journalist is a good e-journalist.’ However, she added that writing on the net was very poor ‘and editing is appalling, because techie types . . . it’s not that part of their brain that’s operating at full whack!’

Another interviewee, an online editor but also a former print editor, said, ‘A reporter is a reporter’, but in ‘editing, revising and sub-editing’ traditional

journalists had the necessary skills. The latter lacked understanding of information architecture, but the attitude to words of many people working in web design was 'atrocious'. None of the interviewees raised the question of the need for journalists to train to work in an interactive way, for example by moderating online discussions or organizing hyperlinks.

Conclusion

Online journalism has the potential to pose fundamental questions for established journalism. Objectivity, reader power, accountability and transparency, the right to reply, access to audience, new ways of telling stories – questions concerning all of these and more are thrown up when we consider the new forms of news. The aim of this research was to reach an understanding of how Irish journalism has embraced new media ways by (1) studying a snapshot of Irish online news and testing it for radical innovation and (2) testing the opinions and insights of journalists to see whether there existed an appetite for new journalism in new media.

When scrutinized, despite their marketing messages to the contrary, it is purely online entities that are seen to have been most conservative in the provision of volume of material and interactive opportunities. Established media have toyed to some degree with interactivity, but have overwhelmingly clung to the mass media model. It would seem that the invested infrastructure for the production of content is crucial to producing news online. Clearly, this carries strong implications for the possibility of the internet providing an opportunity for a new platform for public debate.

Perhaps it is the case that implementation lags behind sentiment. My discussions with journalists demonstrated that most practitioners recognize the potential of new media to improve public discourse. However, most, even those who enthusiastically welcome the development of news online, decline to see it other than as an extension of the old order. The strongest message coming from these discussions was that many of the possibilities and characteristics of new media were to be welcomed, but that they did not affect the core activity of journalism. Whereas a minority pointed earnestly to possibilities for reforming journalism, more of the interviewees – including old print hands and young online editors – already saw difficulties emerging from the demands of online news as well as from the as yet unformed professional structures of internet publishing. Some were explicitly opposed to the idea of interactivity as a central function of media. And a few actively refused to countenance the idea of a new journalism emerging. As one reporter put it: 'A story is a story is a story.'

The cyber-sceptic perspective holds that information does not really want to be free. The Irish online experiment so far has shown us that news online cannot or does not want to, at least when distributed free, escape from the structured norms of few-to-many media. We have seen that, although superficial consideration of online news has promised many enhancements, few were seriously implemented in online media. The opportunity to provide context-rich content, by means of hyperlinking, was spurned; bulletin boards were sparsely implemented, multimediality was almost non-existent, and production

standards were a mixed bag. There was not much particularly new about the new news, and it struggled to match the rhetoric either of providing more or better journalism or publishing online as commercial opportunity.

As news has become ubiquitous, it has not unproblematically become more diverse or provided opportunities for more journalism or essentially different journalism. Rather, any appreciation or recognition of radical potential is counterbalanced by the normative culture that is rooted in the perspective of the established industrial institutions, and in the journalism of mainstream media. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, already, we have been seeing the absorption of radical potential by the status quo (Winston, 1998), not only in terms of technology and commercial potential, but also in terms of the potentialities of new forms of public communication.

This has been the experience of online news, provided free and for the most part by already established content producers. Now, with the movement towards online paid-for news under way, real change may again be a possibility. Framing many of the publishing decisions made manifest in the websites surveyed, as well as many of the opinions expressed by journalists, was a sometimes explicit but often unspoken recognition of the peculiar and perhaps transient economics of free news online.

It may be that giving online news a price, a step that has been taken by many providers, including <ireland.com>, may be the first serious attempt to establish and develop a distinctly online journalism. As a professional group, journalists have an interest in maintaining the exchange value of their work. When the wider question is posed, as to whether 'free' news carries the potential for better news, the conclusion, on the evidence, is that it will not. Websites and journalists alike tell us, to put it in broad terms, that it is 'business as usual'. It will be interesting to see whether, under less radical market conditions, paid-for content erodes that inertia.

This article has taken a meta-perspective on online news and journalistic practice in one national context, attempting to establish a sense of how the new media experience has played out in broad terms. Further research, focused on specific attributes of online news, could provide a closer understanding of how new media are changing, or may change, news. On the evidence gleaned from generalized observation and interviews, no seismic shift is discernible. It may be inevitable that, in smaller ways, in the slowly evolving specifics of hyper-linking or the patterns of interactivity on message boards, the shape of a new journalism may emerge.

Appendix: Journalists Interviewed

Interviewees are briefly profiled here. Note that many of them have since moved on to new roles, and some of the web outlets mentioned are no longer in existence.

Karlin Lillington, a freelance technology journalist working for *The Irish Times* <www.ireland.com> in Ireland and for several other titles abroad, including *Wired* magazine, *Red Herring* and the *San José Mercury News*. At the time of the interview she was also editor of the technology section of

<www.online.ie>, an online entity providing a range of commercial services including largely, but not entirely, syndicated news content.

Katie Hannon, political correspondent for the *Irish Examiner*. As a print journalist with a national newspaper, her work was republished by the newspaper on the internet, at <www.examiner.ie>. Described herself as knowing very little about the internet.

Michael Cunningham, managing director of Volta Digital Media, a new media house providing services to corporate clients. Also editor of *netgains*, Volta's email-format technology newsletter. Formerly joint editor of *The Irish Times*'s computing section, *Computimes*.

Emma Kavanagh, a publications manager at new media company Rondonondo, owned by the dominant telco and since closed after heavy losses. Trained as a journalist, she had responsibility for the highly praised *Doras* directory and its associated content, which included a news feed provided by Independent Network News, an agency set up originally to provide news for local radio stations.

Samantha Fanning, content editor, Dublin, at *Local Ireland*. Her brief included editing and commissioning feature articles, while *Local Ireland* also featured a daily aggregated news roundup. *Local Ireland* was an innovative, many-to-many publishing experiment, which attempted unsuccessfully to have individuals and communities provide local news.

Liam Ferry, founding editor of the *Irish Emigrant*, which has been published as an email newsletter since 1987. Widely applauded as a pioneer of Irish online news publishing, he had no prior experience of journalism.

Sammy Hamill, assistant editor at the *Belfast Telegraph*, one of the earlier and most developed newspaper internet sites on the island. From a print background, seconded to the new media division to conduct a review of the *Telegraph*'s online activities.

Conor Pope, deputy editor of <ireland.com>, incorporating *The Irish Times* online.

Cliff Taylor, new media editor at *The Irish Times*, with responsibility for liaison between the print newspaper and <ireland.com>.

Fintan O'Toole, a prominent columnist with *The Irish Times* and theatre critic with *The New York Daily News*.

Luke McManus, producer of *RTÉ Online News*, which aggregated content from the station's various news and current affairs programmes, as well as producing some original content itself. (*RTÉ Online News* has more recently been subsumed into *RTÉ Interactive*, which includes the organization's teletext services.)

Eugene McGee, editor of the *Longford Leader*, published online with *Unison*, <www.unison.ie>; also a sports pundit with a national print profile.

Christina McHugh, editor of the *Roscommon Herald*, another *Unison* title.

Fiachra Ó Marcaigh, technical editor at <online.ie>. Previously co-editor of *Computimes*, the computing section of *The Irish Times*, as well as systems editor at the newspaper, which owns <ireland.com>.

Sheila McDonald, managing director and editor of *Electric News*. Formerly editor of an internet magazine, also writer of a weekly national newspaper internet review column.

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