



What makes a good online newspaper – we help decide

CDA were invited to help judge the Best Electronic Daily & Weekly Newspaper categories in the 2006 Newspaper Awards. Below our judge, CDA CEO Clare O'Brien, looks at what differentiates the best online examples from electronic chip paper

Looking at this year's entries for the Newspaper Awards' best online categories, I thought hard about what would be CDA's criteria for excellence. Would it be layout, accessibility, ease of use, level of information, depth of content, standards of delivery, innovative use of technology, regard to user behaviour, language and treatment of copy, brand expression... what?

In the end, what distinguishes the best from the rest is a clear commitment to the medium (and that may include some or all of the above criteria). By that I mean an online product that feels like an online product and not like a newspaper in digital form.

Really good online properties are those that have a strong sense of themselves and where they are: ie inhabiting a virtual world, where the user/reader is in charge of creating their own experience. People behave differently with interactive media than they do with conventional media products and, at CDA, we find that if we can get website owners to embrace this concept, they start creating online destinations that begin to meet user expectations.

Users demand an experience that is quite different to the passive consumption of print and traditional broadcast information, so that means acknowledging the importance of newspaper websites that are being managed in a way that allows them to become products in their own right; to generate audiences of value (that is, audiences that keep coming back for more), and which create independent revenue streams.

We were not looking for perfection. This can't exist in a medium where standards are still evolving, as owners and users experiment with what works and what doesn't. But what can exist is a use of technology that makes the most of good content (content that people want) work and that doesn't limit content to words and pictures. Function is also content and so is the way this content is organised to help people view, use and interact with a website as they want.



In fact, the point we have reached now with online media is not dissimilar to the time when television broadcasting went through its massive development phases that included great leaps like the realisation that by moving the camera, new perspectives and effects could be achieved. This opened up whole new creative potential for both dramatic and informative programming.

These are the sort of considerations, plus the commitment to experimenting with the medium, that marks out excellence in the 'now'. Newspaper titles and other websites prepared to have a go at producing a product in its own right, rather than simply depositing their offline offerings – newspapers, magazines, brochures, product information... - online are the ones that turn my head.

They may not always be doing it brilliantly, but by doing it with confidence something new is created, something exciting and something satisfying for the publisher and the people being attracted online.

There were good examples of newspaper brands doing this – Herts 24, The Scotsman, Kent Messenger, The Telegraph and the FT – there is also a preponderance of newspapers simply not recognising that the online medium is far more than a platform for digital page turning. I hope they know who they are because this article isn't about naming those who are not rising to the challenge.

In the event, the two titles I picked out as being best in class for the weekly and national sections of the awards, concurred with my fellow judges' selections and below are the commentaries produced to support my reasoning.

Best electronic daily newspaper – Guardian Unlimited

An online 'newspaper site' that doesn't think of itself as a digital newspaper. I am a slavish fan of the Guardian online. We use snags of the site frequently to demonstrate online content best practice. Many things impress me about this site. The most important (today, at least) is the consistently high standard of related links, which accompany most news and feature stories on the site. Even though the items may be the same as appear in the paper version, the background and related links strategy exemplifies what the medium is all about.



It's also remarkably accessible: you can take in all the sections at a glance, the left hand navigation is clearly delineated, the two level cross menu is simplicity itself. The column measure and excellent screen design make it all very easy to read on screen (a real challenge – people don't read properly on screen). Lots of white space (in the right spaces) anchors everything and helps the eye shift quickly over different items, ads, highlights, heads, links – whatever is in view. I also really like the changing styles for different sections – quite marked in some cases, such as the variety of blog designs. The site tackles any subject and lets anyone comment and the level of debate is extraordinarily high.

Best electronic daily newspaper – The Pink 'Un

Lovely site, absolutely packed with what every football fan loves – news, commentary, gossip and the opportunity to have their say – in one fast to load and easy to access site. So much better than anything I've seen from the mainstream clubs themselves. Every premiership team should have a Pink 'Un.com of their own. The site is obviously a main destination for Norwich City fans – the message boards are hot with entries – what a brilliant user base it's created and a fantastic commercial property that is clearly in profit with terrific scope for growth.

The people running this site have really understood the nature of the internet, user expectation and most importantly, the value of user-generated content. Tempering my gushiness just a little, with a single topic and main focus on a single club to get to grips with, I think the editorial and production team on The Pink 'Un have been more easily able to focus their development attention than some of the broader-based competitors in this section. Perhaps that's something others can learn from: take one section at a time – get good at it, introduce across the rest of the site...

Links

[Guardian Unlimited](#)

[The Pink 'Un](#)

[The 2006 Newspapers Award winners](#)

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