

Michelle Manafy

The Old News and the Good News: Engaging the Digital Native in the

The following is a preview of a chapter, "The Old News and The Good News," that will appear in the forthcoming book *Dancing With Digital Natives: Staying in Step With the Generation That's Transforming the Way Business Is Done*, edited by EContent editor Michelle Manafy and Heidi Gautschi. The book, which will be published in 2010 by CyberAge Books, is a collection of perspectives intended to provide business professionals with applicable insights into how to educate, employ, entertain, and market and sell to a generation that has grown up since the ubiquity of the internet. The book is being written by Manafy, Gautschi, and many other contributors who deliver a variety of insights and expertise that will help readers maximize their interactions with Digital Natives.

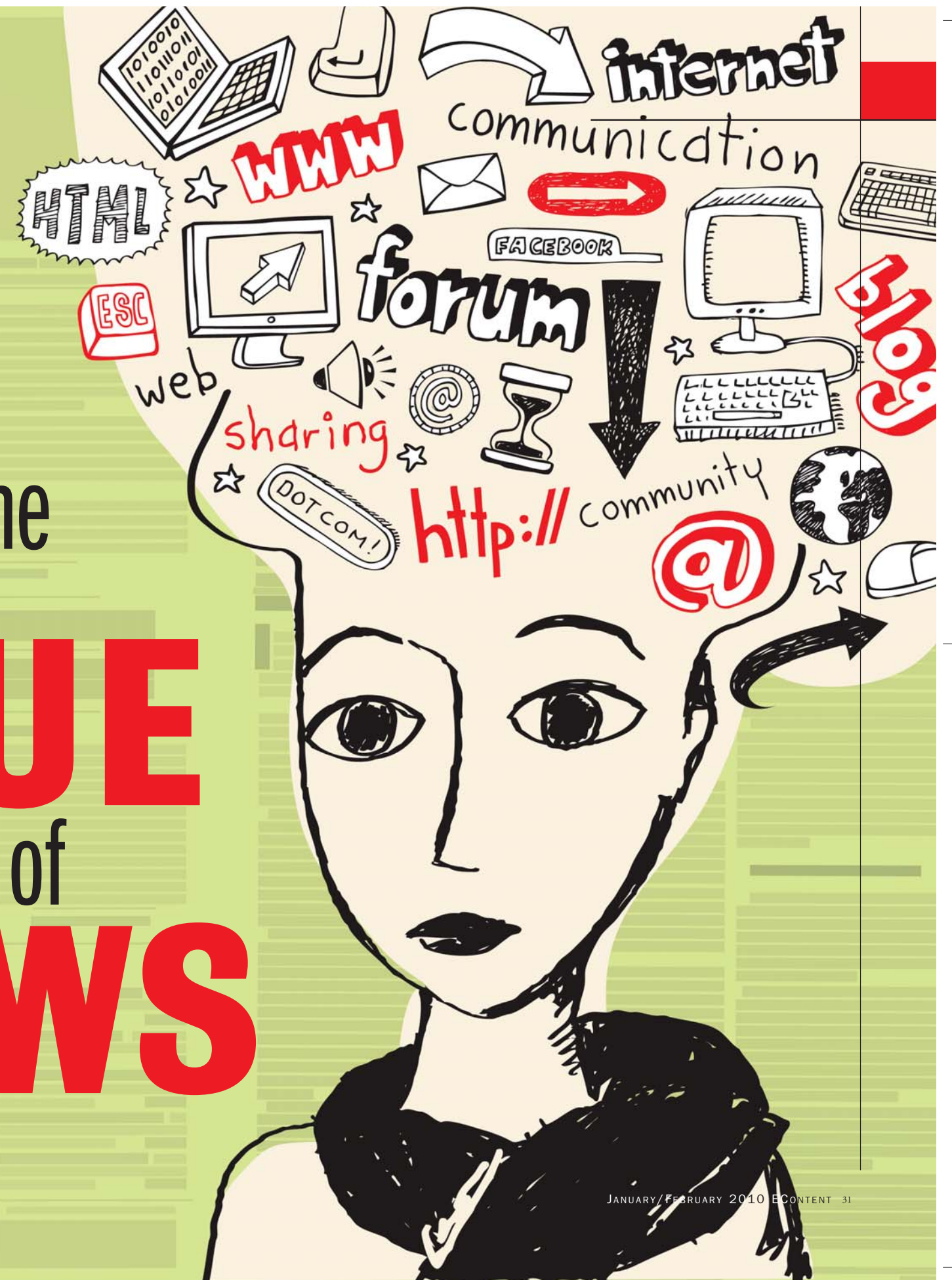
It's not news that magazines are anorexic, newspapers are dropping in droves, and industry leaders are calling for solutions that range from forbidding the use of headlines for linking to building mile-high pay walls around anything and everything. It feels frantic, even desperate.

While tempting, it would be a mistake to write off the dire state of the news business as simply a reflection of the general decline in print readership since the rise of the internet or as just another casualty of the recession. The problems run deeper: Print media was slow to the internet party, viewing online

distribution as "cannibalizing print readership." And, in large part, once media brands came online, they often viewed their sites as little more than an additional outlet for content created specifically for print, reproduced word for word. Then, for better or worse, this content was offered for free on websites, though the same content in print products may have garnered fees.

While print may never go away, the days of newspapers' print preeminence are passing us by. Beset upon by myriad free alternatives and nimble web-native news outlets, venerable print brands have been forced to slash staff, go digital only,

VALUE of NEWS



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and reduce the frequency of print delivery. In 2008, the Tribune Co. filed for Chapter 11. *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and *Rocky Mountain News* are among the numerous newspapers that have closed altogether, and the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism reported that by the end of 2009, 25% of journalistic jobs that existed in 2001 would be gone. To make things worse, the newspaper industry finds itself in this sorry state just as a new generation enters the work force—one with less connection to traditional news media than ever before.

MEET THE NEXT GENERATION OF CONSUMERS

Digital Natives are voracious content consumers. However, they have grown up surrounded by so much media that it has lost its value, at least in the sense of price point. Given this sea of information, it is not surprising that this generation has little connection with any one source. They are notoriously lacking in brand loyalty, congregating at social hubs, and reading the “news” written on Facebook “walls.” Without a doubt, this generation will transform the way news is produced and consumed. To stay in the game, the traditional news media will need to join the native and read the writing on the wall.

While most newspapers today have an online presence, in large part, the news media continues to rely on print revenue to support its infrastructure. It is not revolutionary that about half as many adults ages 18–34 subscribe to newspapers as those in the 45–54 age group, according to a 2005 Newspaper Association of America (NAA) Foundation report. However, while newspaper readership has traditionally increased with age, the NAA found that this is no longer



Hyperlocal coverage, such as offered by The Bakersfield Voice (www.bakersfieldvoice.com), provides one of the most promising applications of social media as journalism. At the local level, readers most want to see themselves in the news. This site is particularly adept at bringing young readers into its participatory mix, a great first step in engaging them as news readers for life.

or visiting newspapers' websites. The simple fact that the NAA is now devoting itself to research specifically targeted at engaging this demographic is indicative of how important it is to engage young readers in news content.

the case. Its report, “Lifelong Readers: The Role of Teen Content,” points out that historically, young people who were not avid newspaper readers in their teens and early 20s usually changed their habits as they aged, yet they found that this was not the case with Generation X and Generation Y.

There is hope, however. In 2008, the NAA found that as many as 75% of young people surveyed had some interest in news, from modest to strong (“Youth Media DNA: In Search of Lifelong Readers”). It seems that “kids today” are interested in news, just—apparently—not in reading newspapers

Not surprisingly, the NAA reports that television and the internet are the forms of media used most frequently by young people. However, though one chart in NAA’s “Youth Media DNA” report indicated that of the websites the individuals surveyed accessed during a week, 20% were online newspapers, 35% were information sites, and 52% were social networking sites, the NAA fails to recommend engaging young readers through their social networks.

The importance of this oversight becomes apparent when we look closer at how Digital Natives are using social networks. EDUCAUSE, which has tracked social network usage on campuses for the past several years, found that the percentage of students visiting sites such as Facebook or MySpace on a daily basis has more than doubled in the past 3 years, from 32.9% in 2006 to 66.2% in 2009 (“The ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, 2009”).

CNN (www.cnn.com) has demonstrated not only its ability to create a community around news but also its own ability to tap this user-generated content to enhance its overall coverage and expand its audience engagement.



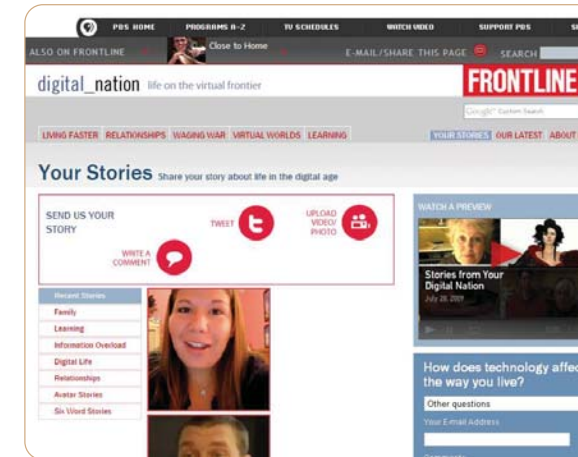
In May 2009, Youth Trends found that Facebook was the No. 3 source among college students for learning about new products and services, after word-of-mouth and television commercials.

Without doubt, in the larger information landscape, we are seeing a marked shift from one in which the media as a whole (or even select premium information brand names) are the sources readers turn to for information to one in which the filter of one’s personal network carries vastly more weight. This tendency to rely on one’s trusted network for information will only increase as the generation of Digital Natives becomes the predominant content consumers. As we examine the decline of media brands and the rise of social networks, the path to news media survival will require “friending” this new breed of content consumer.

PASSIVE CONSUMPTION

In his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neil Postman postulated that the rise of television as the primary news delivery mechanism would lead to the decline of news as a substantive medium for discourse. Postman recognized that television was an optimal medium for the delivery of passive entertainment, and, as messages are molded to fit their medium, news was deformed during the process of its TV makeover.

As Postman wrote, “The single most important fact about television is that people watch it, which is why it is called ‘television.’” He emphasizes that in a one-way medium, discourse becomes impossible. TV news is delivered by soap-star attractive talking heads, who read scripted sound bites, transitioning between catastrophe and film critique with little more than a “now ... this.” Information exists in shiny little bursts



While making the documentary Growing up Digital (www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/digitalnation), PBS listened to its subjects and responded by providing a vibrant, visually appealing site for its sequel, Digital Nation, in which almost any user will see a “familiar face”—and can add his or her own to the mix. It has attracted a remarkably broad demographic and has enhanced its content along the way.

article” or “rate this article”) isn’t enough. The emerging content consumers want to interact with information whenever and

however they choose. This starts off with allowing content to be readily shared and linked to—but this is only the beginning.

INTERACTIVE CONSUMPTION

Postman’s brilliant analysis of the effect the primacy of television as a communication mechanism has had on discourse among the average Joe stops short of predicting the impact of the internet. This is certainly no reflection on Postman’s prognosticating prowess: In 1985, when the book was originally published, computers had just begun their march to desktop domination.

Where the evolution of media takes a significant turn away from Postman’s predictions for news as discourse is in the fact that, unlike television, the web is not a passive one-way medium. Yes, it is dominated by searchers and lurkers, but a generation of content consumers is maturing. These consumers grew up steeped in a web-based communal culture—one in which any idea is ripe for comments, linking, co-opting and incorporating, mashing up, and remixing. The news media has an opportunity to meet the demands of this emerging reader by opening communication mechanisms via sharing, linking, commenting, contributing, and more. It also has a powerful opportunity to reshape the value of news by listening and responding.

However, simply providing feedback mechanisms (such as “comment on this

that, devoid of context and discussion, do little to actually inform.

For the news business to succeed, it must evolve to fit the new shape of discourse: by rebuilding the lines of communication and, upon these lines, rewriting the rules of content creation so that news will regain its rightful place as a creation by the people to inform the people.

CREATORS AS CONSUMERS

The NAA’s “Youth Media DNA” report states that “respondents were more likely to recall reading school newspapers prepared by their peers ... rather than newspaper youth content prepared for them.” For Digital Natives, content written by their peers is good, yet content that they can become actively involved with is even better.

The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism’s “State of the News Media Report 2009” demonstrates how social media has become a genuine force: “What began as a few podcasts, RSS feeds and e-mail alerts a year or two ago has mushroomed into a more serious emphasis on developing multiple forms of distribution. One form involves helping citizens grab and share information with one another. ... Most news websites now have links attached to stories so readers

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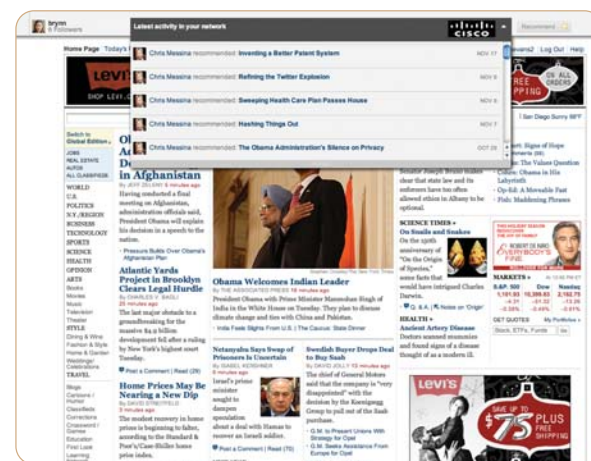
can more easily share that content, and many have gone further, creating their own Twitter or Facebook accounts to put more content into consumers' hands and allow them to pass it along." Pew also points out that this "movement represents a dawning realization that the nature of the Web is something the news industry cannot fight and might even begin to employ."

WE ARE THE NEWS

Today's information consumers have the tools and the desire to participate, and increasingly, they demonstrate their ability to contribute valuable newsworthy content. Consider the U.S. Airways crash in January 2009, in which Janis Krums of Sarasota, Fla., posted the first photo of flight 1549 on Twitter from his iPhone. About 30 minutes later, MSNBC interviewed him as a witness live on TV (www.businessinsider.com/2009/1/us-airways-crash-rescue-picture-citizen-journalism-twitter-at-work). Similar cooperative coverage of terrorist acts in Mumbai in 2008 and of the 2009 Iranian elections, and even MTV's deployment of a "street team" of 51 amateur journalists (one in each state and the District of Columbia), demonstrate the way in which traditional media can leverage community contributions to enhance professional content offerings.

Facilitating this sort of open content exchange goes well beyond the content itself, however. For a generation that expects to read about itself, reported on and written by itself, enabling its members to easily contribute content to a site in the form of photos, video, and commentary will go a long way toward developing a relationship with them as readers.

News media mogul Rupert Murdoch was quoted in 2005 at the American Society of Newspaper Editors as saying that young readers "don't want to rely



It is particularly interesting that The New York Times (www.nytimes.com) takes the news to the Digital Native—users can see information on Facebook if that's where they "live"—while also showing friends' activities on The Times' website so that when you are reading there, the filter of the social network remains part of the experience.

latest tool, informational, or social hub is.

However, it also means inviting readers to participate in the creation process, not only by seeking their potential contributions on sharing sites (when you need them) but by making it easy for them to help shape ideas as you develop them, to submit video and photos for consideration, and to contribute raw content itself.

News organizations are beginning to realize that the best way to build a loyal reader base is to connect with readers and build a relationship—something that requires honest, genuine interaction. This sort of connection will become essential as Digital Natives become the dominant content consumer. Luckily, all over the world, media brands large and small are experimenting with community involvement and interaction and are providing inspiration for further innovation. In the full chapter "The Old News and The Good News," which will appear in the book *Dancing With Digital Natives: Staying in Step With the Generation That's Transforming the Way Business Is Done*, I take a closer look at some of the best examples of media engaging audiences through social interaction, as well as reveal some alternate routes that will deliver value to the bottom line—and help support the evolving media business.

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