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Making the Most of a New Medium

By Aaron Halabe
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Getting the news once meant relying on Jimmy the paper boy, whose sidearm fling sent the morning newsprint skittering to front porches.

Jimmy is still employed, but today millions consume their news digitally, and at broadband speeds – a scenario difficult to predict a decade ago when Microsoft and NBC News teamed to create [MSNBC.com](#), now the Internet's top news and information destination.

At launch, July 15, 1996, MSNBC became a player in the brave new world of online journalism. *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, CNN and others had premiered online news services, too.

It wasn't long before Microsoft's technologic prowess, and NBC News' journalistic gravitas – and the promotional power of each – drove millions to the new site.

In 1996, 2.82 million unique users visited MSNBC. At the time, the Internet had a total of 47 million unique users. MSNBC now boasts 27.7 million unique users, an 880 percent increase since launch. The Internet as a whole has grown to more than 1 billion unique users in the past decade, according to [Internet World Stats](#).

In the black financially since July 2004 by dint of ad revenue, site managers keep their eyes on traffic numbers. The journalistic goal, though, said Jennifer Sizemore, MSNBC's managing editor, is to be first, fast and best, and to produce "high-impact original reporting that takes full advantage of the medium."

Mission accomplished. In 2005 – for the second consecutive year – MSNBC received the National Press Club's "Best Journalism Site," for its use of online media to educate and inform the public. It also won *Editor and Publisher's* award for "Best Overall Network TV/Cable-Affiliated News Service," along with numerous photo and design [accolades](#).

At the Start, 'Things were Pretty Disorganized'

At its inception, no one anticipated building trophy-display cases. Tensions ran high between journalists and the Microsoft technical staffers charged



Managing editor Jennifer Sizemore's push for "high-impact original reporting" helped drive the National Press Club's Best Journalism Site award two years running.

with building out the Web site and its publishing infrastructure. Everyone had their own lingo and expectations. Techies, whose deliverables often took years to produce, were under pressure from journalists accustomed to turning around a product in a few hours or less.

Making things worse, the site crashed regularly, sometimes during important news events, like the 1996 presidential election coverage.

The early publishing process was laborious and time-consuming. "Ten years ago it was a feat to publish every hour. Today we can publish in literally seconds," said Al Olson, who started as chief copy editor and now is a senior business editor. "While Bush and Blair were having a news conference, for example, we instantly published video snippets of the event ... before it was even over."



MSNBC's newsroom in Redmond is one of 3 – the others are in London and Secaucus, N.J. – that enable the site to update content 24/7. Photo by Brian Donohue

"I think there was always a real optimism about [MSNBC] but to begin with things were pretty disorganized," said Mike Bruner, a writer and Projects Team editor. "We were inventing things as we were going along to a large degree; nobody had really done this before."

The site originally lacked templates to produce interactive elements. Journalists teamed with Microsoft developers "to see if there would be a way to put things together," Bruner said. "It was exciting, but there was also uncertainty about the business model, and how successful it would ultimately be."

Incremental improvements brought new tools and processes. In 2003 the tech team replaced the site's infrastructure, which now incorporates a .NET-based system running SQL 2000, ASP.NET and Windows Forms – all written in C# and XSL.

"This allowed us to move from an edition-based model," said MSNBC architect Peter Durham, "where all changes were made offline, then batched and published on an hourly basis, to real on-demand publishing." Durham said the upgrade removed roadblocks and allowed editors to "create a story, create a link to it, hit the publish button ... [and] get breaking news out to our users faster than our competition."

Editorial Quality and Speed Shape Success

The Building 25 newsroom employs a staff of about 130 editors and journalists, in addition to a multidisciplinary team of interactive and

multimedia producers.

"We do journalism specifically for the Web," Sizemore said, "that's what we're experts at and that's what makes us special. Our original reporting takes full advantage of our medium."

The site is filled with online polls, video, photo slide shows, webcasts of NBC News programs, blogs such as news anchor Brian Williams' "[The Daily Nightly](#)" and other [multimedia](#) elements.



This was MSNBC's home page Sept. 3, 1997, days after Princess Diana's Aug. 31 death.

The "[Rising from Ruin](#)" project exemplifies multimedia journalism in action, Sizemore said. Rotating teams of journalists shared stories of the Hurricane Katrina recovery— combining blog-style field reporting, time-lapse photography, citizen-journalist dispatches and in-depth reports.

Blogging gets readers involved, Bruner said. "We could do the reporting, but we let them have the conversation around that. It's almost like wrapping news-talk radio around a hard news story."

"The entirety of the immersive experience is exactly what we're striving for and we're able to tell a piece of a story that no one else is really telling," Sizemore said.

The ability to update 24/7 enables MSNBC to beat the competition on publishing deadline stories, something it does 97 percent of the time, Sizemore asserted. It helps that staffers produce the site's home page in three time zones. At day's end in Redmond, the site gets passed to the London bureau, which passes it to the Secaucus, N.J., newsroom and then back to the West Coast.

Feedback suggests readers have come to rely on MSNBC. "The site was extremely busy [on 9/11], but MSNBC.com did an excellent job of keeping me well-informed during the crisis," wrote one contributor to MSNBC's 10-year recollections page.

"During the confusing and upsetting days after the 2000 election, you were my source for the very latest updates on who would end up being president. ... I appreciated the coverage," wrote another.



A celebratory message adorns Building 25 in Redmond.

What the Future Could Hold

Sizemore recently introduced 18 new employees at a recent meeting, and she still has 10 more to hire in the next year, including an investigative reporter.

Although a crack news team will be a constant, she's reluctant to predict what MSNBC will look like in the future. "I would hate to read those quotes in five years and have them be ridiculously wrong." She expects, though, that readers will be offered customized content delivery, improved search, enhanced video and alternate news delivery platforms.

Whatever the future holds, Sizemore said MSNBC.com will remain "an independent voice for journalism that matters."

That's good news for its legion of visitors. "I continue to get most of my news online," wrote one reader. "I will soon have to find a new source of print paper for use in the litter box and, unfortunately, the paper carrier may soon be obsolete."

Are you listening, Jimmy?

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