

MSNBC.com

Mark Trahant

What does great journalism look like on MSNBC.com?

My favorite definition of excellence comes from the 1947 Hutchins' commission report.

"A truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning; second, a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism; third, a means of projecting the opinions and attitudes of the groups in the society to one another; fourth, a method of presenting and clarifying the goals and values of the society; and, fifth, a way of reaching every member of the society by the currents of information, thought, and feeling...."

The Internet is the perfect medium for the lofty standards raised by Hutchins.

I see three principles we can put into action.

"A truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning."

No journalism medium can touch the Internet when it comes to providing readers or viewers with a context for a day's events. We can answer background questions in a breaking story: Where is the village? Show me the map? Why did this happen now? Or, how many people are affected? What has made this situation occur now?

We show maps. We mix in sound. And add pictures, either as slide shows or full video.

The Internet is the medium of context. Period.

The challenge at MSNBC.com is to make certain that we understand this principle better than any competitor. We make context intuitive).

The second principle: "A forum for the exchange of comment and criticism."

This is an ideal well that sums up what MSNBC.com has already built I think we already have the best opinion section on the web – it's better than most newspaper editorial pages (and certainly far better than the one-sided rant on much of talk radio and TV). I do see significant challenges here, though, namely, how do we best build on MSNBC's on-air opinion and what's the role of Slate?

What if we open up the discussion before and after what's on the cable shows? A guest has a thought, a response to what was on Donohue, she writes it down after the fact. We post it. The discussion continues with full discourse. This is one way we can distinguish MSNBC – both the web site and the cable channel – from its competitors.

Third principle: "A means of projecting the opinions and attitudes of the groups in the society to one another ..."

MSNBC can own this one. This is diversity and we already are one of the few news web sites to understand the changing demographic nature of America. The site has implicitly recognized that this nation is changing – and it's so important for news organizations to reflect what's to be. We can do more. We can make sure that our content reflects all of America, truly acting as America's news channel. How do we do this? We pay attention. For example we make certain that all of our weblogs are diverse and not written by the same demographic group (as is the case right now).

Another absolute principle is that MSNBC.com must make money to do great journalism; the latter doesn't ever happen without

the former. So the question is are we smart enough to take these three principles and apply them in a practical, profitable applications?

I think so. I think MSNBC.com has the potential to rethink news in a way that makes economic – and journalism sense.

Consider the notion of community.

Newspapers are putting most of their resources into a “local, local, local” strategy. Forgoing bureaus, giving up regional coverage and ceding much of their national report to the wire services and supplemental reports.

We can take advantage of this in two ways.

First: We can market more of NBC’s material under the byline of MSNBC.com. What if a small newspaper – one that cannot afford the Washington Post or New York Times’ wire – wants to use copy with our brand? What about opinion material? (The Seattle Post-Intelligencer has reprinted my MSNBC.com columns in its newspaper with that byline; there ought to be lots of that). This does present marketing challenges, particularly on the news side (opinion would be an easy sell) but the potential is for NBC to be a relied upon national news source the way the national newspapers are now.

A natural partnership here would be to link with the ethnic press (already organized in California). Two of California’s largest newspapers, for example, are published in Chinese and Spanish languages.

I suspect we could use their copy free – in exchange for international versions of MSNBC.com stories that those publications could use in their native language editions. The annual convention of the California’s ethnic press – a perfect place to negotiate this sort of exchange is in September, this year in L.A.

The second idea is more doable immediately. We could shift the

definition of local. If you look at our “local” pages now, it’s mostly recycled content from our partners. That works – but it’s as deep as a puddle. What if we redefine “local?” Local could mean the “law profession” or “medicine” or hundreds of specialized fields, such as the environment or media. We then capture every story of interest to those readers – as well as provide them with a blog that is ahead of the curve (such as Poynter’s Romenesko for media). We make it a must read for that field. What would it be worth to advertisers if, for example, 20 percent of all labor lawyers read the blog every day?

How much is buzz worth? We get that by focusing on a redefined demographic or intellectual community.

One weblog that I would start immediately (before a competitor thinks of the idea) is something like “BuzzBlog.” A daily, Internet version of Reader’s Digest focusing on weblogs. I’d hire a really great writer. Pay about \$200 a column (cap at \$52,000 per year) – so you want someone who’s been toiling and this is gravy. Columnist should be funny; proficient around the ‘net; and a good personality for TV. The column would troll all of the daily blogs and write a ‘take’ on them (with links to the original). If done right the piece would be so funny no one would need to go beyond it (but they could if they want). The range would have to be wide from movies on “ainitcool.com” to personal revelations from individual sites.

I’d generate traffic for BuzzBlog two ways.

First: Set this up so after it’s edited for clarity, etc., an email version is sent to MSNBC’s newspaper partners. Even though it’d be a day old, this would be lightning fast for newspapers trying to write about all-things web. People could read the old legacy version – and still find the original sources if they wanted too (or click ahead to the next day’s column on MSNBC.com). We could start this off by getting one newspaper to test the whole thing (my bet would be the Seattle Post-Intelligencer) so that we can fine-tune the product before expanding it across the network of partners.

The second thing you could do is book the writer on TV and radio shows as a funny way to bring ordinary people into the

vastness of the web. (Perhaps starting on non-NBC properties ... so that it doesn't appear to just shill for MSNBC.Com). We might want to figure on some way of compensation for the writer if she does talk shows on radio for free.

If we do this right, we out-Drudge drudge. We get the edge – quickly – while preserving our news values.

Another way we can redefine community is through a push into schools. We should own this segment.

Why not produce daily lesson plans based on the news? Free material that schools across America can use. How many teachers could make MSNBC.com a part of their classroom text on a daily or weekly basis? What if they wanted to download and show an NBC news program that explained a complicated story such as the Middle East? Or Dateline's report on what happened at Oklahoma City? The video, the daily news report, and supplemental teaching materials would make the teacher's task easier. (Newspapers have been doing this for years with a program called Newspapers in Education; I think we could make that program both expensive and irrelevant.)

One of the great technological strengths yet to be exploited is refrigeration. The ability to keep an archive of news stories and then sell content with 'expired' shelf life. So much of our copy is written once – read once – and then forgotten. Many newspapers are now making the first read free – but then the material must be paid for to use again.

Mark Trahan at MSNBC.com.

- I'll bring to the job a passion for quality journalism. I'll be a constant advocate – a country preacher – both inside the shop and to the community at large.
- My first task, if hired, would be to review everything. Does it

meet our journalistic mission? Are we doing more than we should? (One of the great journalistic conversations from newspapers is what topic should we cover less? A case in point: the cop beat has grown at most newspapers even as the news has become relevant – yet we keep posting three shifts of reporters because we always have done that.) I'd interview staff, readers and viewers and test all of this against resources. Again a lesson from newspapers: If you do two or three things really well, you can be a great newspaper. What are the two or three things MSNBC.com does better than any other news organization?

- The second task will be to find folks who want to be part of a team, mostly insiders. Journalists tend to fear change, so that fear needs to be exchanged for something better, something exciting.
- Because I've worked at some of the smallest newspapers around, I know how to stretch resources. I've so often heard reporters complain there's not enough resources devoted to news – yet in nearly every case it's not a question of resources, but how those resources are deployed. Are we smart in how we use our news assets?
- I am not afraid of change or new thinking. I love the idea that we can invent something or do news differently and still build on the principles of the past.
- Another thing I bring to the job is a healthy Rolodex. I can hire the best journalists by tapping into an existing network.
- I've long been a practicing blogger ... only I do it for myself. What if I opened up the process to readers and viewers – not just what's coming (like the NBC News tonight emails) but why one story was picked over another. Then allow folks to make their case for the next time. It won't change anything ... perhaps.

- I would also be an articulate spokesman for why MSNBC represents the best of new journalism. I turn down far more speaking requests – college and community – than I can do already; I could turn this to our advantage. Three: I can be the country preacher inside, marshalling resources for news-packages that will enhance the MSNBC brand.
- I am already connected to the mainstream of the journalism community: Serving or have served on boards such as, The Freedom Forum. Poynter. Maynard. Founding board member of Unity. Former president Native American Journalism Association. The Committee of Concerned Journalists. Accrediting Committee on Journalism and Mass Communications.
- I also understand and absolutely believe in this financial proposition: We need to make money so that we can do good journalism. Good journalism just doesn't happen; there must be support and that means making money.