

Location:



The Online Journ@list

Using the Internet and
Other Electronic Resources

Third Edition



ANDY REDDICK

ELLIOT KING

The Online Journ@list

Using the Internet and Other Electronic Resources

Third Edition

Randy Reddick

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Preface

In the early 1990s, widespread computer-based communications networks, most prominently the Internet, came online. This innovation has changed the practice of journalism forever. The impact of the Internet on journalism promises to be more encompassing and pervasive than any other revolution in communications technology.

Pat Stith, Pulitzer Prize-winning computer-assisted reporting specialist for the Raleigh (North Carolina) *News & Observer* has said, "Those who use these tools will be ahead. Those who don't will be left behind—and may not survive."

Nora Paul of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies has told journalists, "By taking advantage of the access to information and people available to you by using a computer, your research and interviewing can have a range and immediacy that is simply impossible without a computer's assistance."

In the three years since the second edition of *The Online Journalist* appeared, the Internet and other computer-based communications networks have been transformed from dynamic, widespread, accessible new channels of communication to arguably the dominant channels of communication. On January 10, 2000, America Online and Time Warner announced a merger to create a fully-integrated Internet-age media and communications company. The hosts of television shows routinely urge viewers to get more information from their Web site. In fact, it seems as if every self-respecting 14-year-old has a personal home page. Movies are made about romancing conducted via e-mail.

Moreover, nearly all college students have access to the Web, and newsrooms now provide reporters with Internet access at their desks. This edition of the book reflects and incorporates these trends.

The third edition of *The Online Journalist* describes and demonstrates the resources available to journalists and how reporters can use the Internet and other online resources to do their jobs more efficiently and effectively. It also discusses the impact this exploding technology is having and will have on journalism, the pitfalls reporters and editors must avoid as they enter cyberspace, and the legal and ethical issues raised by online journalism. It takes an in-depth look at the Web as a publishing medium for news and makes an early assessment of the overall impact these changes have had on journalists and news media.

Jargon-free and intended for both students and professional journalists, this book is a valuable resource for those beginning to apply the Internet to journalism and experienced Net surfers. It helps readers maximize their use of this new technology and capitalize on the opportunities the Web offers journalists.

In addition to introducing the range of online resources and clearly explaining how to use all the major applications on the Internet, *The On-line Journalist* includes a glossary of terms, as well as appendixes that describe useful online resources for journalists and give guidance for selecting an Internet provider.

As in the first and second editions, we feel grateful to many people. We would like to thank our families—our wives Anita and Nancy; our children Aliza, Marcie, and Jordan (Elliot's own new third edition), Laura, Ben, Roxanne, Jennifer, Heather, and Jacob.

We would also like to thank the following professors for their reviews and feedback on the second and first editions: Virginia Bachelor, State University of New York College at Brockport; Jacqueline Lambiase, University of North Texas; Franklin Parks, Frostburg State University; Mike Cowling, University of Wisconsin—Oshkosh; Nancy Roberts, University of Minnesota; Paul Adams, California State University—Fresno; Kim Walsh-Childers, University of Florida; and Jim Ross, Northeastern University.

Loyola College continues to be a supportive environment for experimenting with online resources. Since the second edition, Elliot has established the New Media Center of Loyola College as a high-end research and development facility for Web-based content. We would like to give special thanks to Elliot's associates at the New Media Center, Barney Kirby, Megan Sapnar, and Tina Lariviere. We appreciate the support and encouragement provided by Neil Alperstein and Andy Ciofalo for this project and for seeing the contribution the Internet can make to the Department of Writing and Media.

FACS, now with offices in San Jose (Silicon Valley) and Pasadena, California, and in London, continues to support and encourage the efforts of Randy to help journalists and journalism students to use these new technologies for doing better reporting. Special thanks go to Jack Cox, Peter McCarty, Chris Gardner, and Mary Jacobson.

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An Introduction

When he was working for the Halifax *Daily News*, Tom Regan was doing a story on Canada's troubling national debt. "Several politicians and right-wing business groups were running around yelling 'The sky is falling!' and demanding that the government make enormous cuts in Canada's social programs," Regan wrote. "I wanted to find out if there was any substance to these dire predictions."

What Regan did was to post some messages to Usenet news groups and to electronic discussion lists related to Canadian politics. In his postings he asked "for anyone with real information to reply to my query." Then he used an Internet program named Gopher (the first Internet browsing program) to find documents on the Canadian economy. All this took him about a half hour, he reported.

"When I checked an hour later, responses to my queries abounded," he wrote. He had notes from a professor in Montreal and the names of "three international economists from major U.S. financial firms who said Canada's debt crisis was being overblown." Another note led him to an expert on Canadian economics living in Australia.

"Without the Internet, it would have taken weeks to research the story, and I would have been limited to 'experts' in and around Nova Scotia," Regan concluded.

During the past five years, an increasing number of journalists have joined pioneers like Regan to use the Internet as a means of communicating with other people and of accessing information stored throughout the world. In fact, the Internet is becoming as fundamental a tool for reporting as the interview and the telephone.

For example, Sergio Charlab, special projects editor at *Jornal do Brasil*, had a challenging assignment. An important book about computers and the human mind had been translated into Portuguese. Charlab said that *The Emperor's New Mind* by British mathematician Roger Penrose "is interesting, but it was not easy for a non-technical person to analyze its

thesis.” By posting messages to what he felt were appropriate Usenet news groups, Charlab found others who had not only read the book but had written papers critical of some shortcomings in Professor Penrose’s theory. Ultimately, Charlab obtained the e-mail address of Professor Penrose and “interviewed” him. He did all this without one telephone call.

In the fall of 1996, Silicon Graphics, a major computer manufacturer released a new line of equipment ranging from workstations to supercomputers. The announcement revealed the technological direction of the company for the next several years. For months, company officials had stumped the country, alerting key journalists and analysts of their plans.

But for the announcement itself, Silicon Graphics organized a real-time press conference on the World Wide Web. Journalists and others accessed the Silicon Graphics Web site, where they obtained background briefing papers, biographies of senior executives and press releases describing the new products in detail. They also could listen to a live audio feed of company officials outlining their plans. And they could submit questions via e-mail to which the executives could respond.

For its last set of major announcements the year before, Silicon Graphics had asked about 75 journalists to fly to company headquarters in northern California. By moving their press conference to the Web, they were able to attract more participants at less cost. And the journalists themselves received a superior briefing about the key issues.

This chapter will

- describe the mission of this book,
- discuss the relationship of technology, access, and journalism,
- characterize the target audience for the book,
- point out the differences between the second and third editions of *The Online Journalist*, and
- suggest a sequence for using the book to master online skills.

The Mission of This Book

This book is about empowerment. It is about the empowerment of individual journalists, the empowerment of entire organizations, and the empowerment of other information providers. Its aim is to give journalists and students of journalism the skills they need to flourish in the years to come.

This book describes a group of information-gathering tools that make some types of high-level reporting less dependent on company resources than on a journalist’s initiative. The objective of this book is to teach good journalists and students of journalism how to practice better journalism.

In the past, elite media with enormous news budgets have sent out correspondents to centers of power and to locations of history-making events at home and abroad. They have had access to the inaccessible.

Today, “ordinary” reporters and student reporters using global computer network resources such as the Internet have instant electronic access to important documents, government data, privately held information, the world’s greatest libraries, and expert sources and government officials without ever leaving their desks. Instead of going to Washington, Ottawa, London, or Cairo, New Delhi, Beijing, Taipei, Tokyo, or Cape Town, today’s journalists may bring to their own desks resources from important centers of the world. And the same tools that reach around the world work down the block and around the corner.

Moreover, a reporter “fishing” for people who have firsthand knowledge of newsworthy events can reach tens of thousands of potential sources in just a couple of hours. A carefully worded query posted in the proper news groups, entered into online forums, and sent out to the right electronic mail lists can quickly net a bountiful harvest of eyewitnesses to some event, of victims to some plot or oversight, or of people with other firsthand knowledge that qualifies them as a news source.

Finally, every reporter who has held a beat has had to interview somebody on topics about which the reporter has had little background or expertise. Aside from being uncomfortable, the reporter is likely to ask ill-informed questions. Such questions elicit answers that do little to inform readers or audience members. Many news sources make it policy not to waste time with poorly informed journalists.

Again, through Internet resources the journalist can quickly locate and download “white papers” on just about any topic imaginable. Tucked away on sites on the World Wide Web, in news-group cubbyholes, listserv archives, and various specialized computer directories are storehouses of information that can provide journalists with answers to basic questions. More important, with that information in hand, journalists can ask more penetrating and probing questions than they could in the past.

Technology, Access, and Journalism

Interesting, timely, and accurate information is fundamental fodder for good journalism. For the last century, access to information has primarily defined the work that reporters do. Beats and specialization revolve around access. Police reporters work with information from the police. Court reporters become experts in understanding legal information. Sports reporters traffic in batting averages and zone defenses.

For years, the White House beat was considered the most prestigious in U.S. journalism. At the bottom line, the role of a White House reporter

was defined by access to information from the White House. The first White House reporters hovered close outside the Executive Mansion itself, monitoring who entered and left for meetings with the chief executive. In the early 1900s, Theodore Roosevelt began meeting formally with reporters on a regular basis. His actions granted a certain status to those reporters. From then on, White House reporters were privy to information that reporters working in Philadelphia, Chicago, or Los Angeles just could not get on a timely basis.

That situation is rapidly changing. With the development of commercial databases, computer bulletin boards, and the Internet, journalists working anywhere can have the same access to much of the information once restricted to White House reporters. Today, any reporter with access to the Internet can visit the White House briefing room at <http://http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/html/briefroom.html> and obtain White House press releases, transcripts of press conferences and speeches, summaries of reports generated by federal agencies, and a host of other material.

Along the same lines, business reporters can now obtain Securities and Exchange Commission filings electronically. Science reporters can explore the databases of the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation and the National Library of Medicine among other resources. Court reporters can access court filings and decisions. In almost every area of interest to journalists, reporters dramatically increase their access to information through the Internet.

In the same way that telephones allowed reporters to interview people around the country, Internet applications allow people to locate and obtain information from locations around the world. In short, online information allows reporters to do their jobs better no matter where they are physically located.

The Payoff of Increased Access

The question is, "Do reporters need access to more information?" After all, isn't there already a glut of information? Moreover, with so much information available, will reporters be reduced to simply sifting through information produced by others to pass on to busy readers?

The answer is complex but clear. The more access to information reporters have, the better reporters will be able to fulfill their mission to inform the public about key issues and interests of the day. More access to more information can only lead to better journalism.

The late investigative reporter I. F. Stone demonstrated in the 1960s and early 1970s the power of exploring public sources of information ignored by other people. Relying exclusively on not-so-obscure, but little-publicized public documents, he revealed how the U.S. government

misled the American people about its policies in Vietnam. To review most of those documents, Stone had to be in Washington. Increasingly, a reporter anywhere in the country has that ability.

Increased access to documents can also reduce reporters' reliance on specific sources, allowing them to be more independent and objective and making it more difficult for politicians and handlers to put a specific "spin" on events. For example, early in his administration, President Bill Clinton pushed for passage of a \$30 billion crime bill. Some Republican senators charged that the bill was filled with pork-barrel projects. Most of the reporting about the bill consisted of charges being hurled back and forth in Washington and the potential political repercussions for President Clinton if the bill was defeated.

But with that bill accessible online, reporters from Altoona to Anchorage could have downloaded and analyzed what kind of impact the proposals would have had in their communities. They could have then interviewed local sources to get their readings on the measures. Local officials could have reflected on the impact of the bill—not on inside-the-beltway politics but in their own communities. Using online access, reporters can make national and international news more relevant to their own communities. Should they wish, reporters anywhere can now analyze the federal budget according to their own criteria rather than the criteria of politicians in Washington.

Far from reducing reporters to sifters of information, the explosion of access to a wider range of sources of information will make the role of reporters much more valuable. Reporters will be able to develop more authoritative stories more quickly. More important, reporters will be the only ones in position to synthesize information from disparate sources into stories that are relevant to their readers.

For example, let's say a legal reporter wants to investigate the performance of the local court system. Among the key questions: "How long does it take civil suits to be resolved?"; "How many judges does the civil court have and what is the total budget?"; and "How satisfied are the litigants who use civil court to resolve their dispute?"

In addition to surveying local court records and interviewing local, self-interested participants, the reporter with online access could compare the local court performance to court performance in other similar cities. The reporter could identify experts, key players and knowledgeable observers around the country to provide insight and perspective. If there were appropriate federal information, that could be identified and located as well. The reporter could network with other reporters working on like topics, drawing on their expertise and experience. And all this research could be conducted without traveling and within the normal daily work routine.

Reporters craft useful, interesting stories. Online access to wider sources of information means that more reporters can pursue more stories

of greater interest to specific readers or viewers. More fact-filled and broader in scope, those stories should be of greater value than ever before.

For Whom This Book Is Intended

You do not have to be a Macintosh maven, a Windows whiz, a UNIX virtuoso, or any other kind of computer savant to be proficient at harvesting online information. This book tells journalists what buttons to push to find the information they are seeking. It does so using plain English. It also describes strategies for how to think about gathering information online. *The Online Journalist* assumes that most journalists have little desire to become computer programmers or to learn computer languages.

Instead, *The Online Journalist* assumes that most reporters have in mind certain information they need and that they want the information in a hurry. If they get the information quickly, they can spend their deadline time crafting the best story possible rather than wrestling with inflexible machines. Not only will journalists proficient with these tools have more time to write, their reports can be more thorough and comprehensive. It is the aim of this book to enable journalists to get quickly and easily the information they need in their work.

At the same time, this book assesses the impact of the Internet on journalism. It looks at the Internet not only as a tool for reporters but as a new medium for news. It looks at the efforts of news organizations to reach audiences via the Web and discusses legal and ethical ramifications of the use of the Internet in journalism.

To use online sources of information, journalists have to have access to the Internet and the World Wide Web. There are several different ways to get access to the Web. Almost all colleges and universities in America are now connected to the Internet and the Web. Students and faculty should consult their information-services support team to arrange e-mail accounts and get an overview of the online services on campus.

Off campus, many media companies provide online access to all of their reporters. Many already have at least a couple of computers networked to the Internet. In the not too distant future, Internet access in media companies should be as ubiquitous as telephone access.

Moreover, millions of people have arranged their own Internet access either through services such as CompuServe and America Online or through Internet service providers. MindSpring Communication, the Microsoft Network (MSN) and other major companies provide Internet access as do many small providers around the country. Moreover, some cable television companies offer high speed Internet access via either Excite@Home or Roadrunner. And local telephone companies, in