Building Basic News Sites

Thom Lieb

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PREFACE

The World Wide Web has become a major force in journalism. Virtually every newspaper and magazine has a Web site, and many publications exist only on the Web.

For journalism students and instructors, this presents a challenge. The essential skills of good journalism remain the same and require a good deal of class time to cover. Yet many jobs now require students to have at least a basic knowledge of putting news and features online. For instructors, the challenge is teaching these skills in classes that already place many demands on a limited amount of time. Many working journalists face a similar challenge in quickly mastering the task of Web building.

There are countless books on the market that teach HTML and Web-building skills. Many are very good. But they generally attempt to be all things to all people, and consequently, even the "Quick Guides" run hundreds of pages and cover features most readers will never need.

Building Basic News Sites takes a new approach. By focusing on the skills actually used in the construction of online newspaper and magazine sites, this book offers a quick guide to understanding how common Web building tasks are accomplished, and it can get readers up and running rapidly.

While the book provides a guide to HTML, it is not only about using HTML. Rather, it covers a range of skills needed to produce visually appealing basic Web sites, from creating Web pages, graphics and audio and video components to putting everything online and making it readily available to Web surfers. The book liberally uses computer screen shots to illustrate the operations. Instead of providing instruction in using specific programs, this book provides the basic details that readers will find helpful no matter what programs they use.

A companion Web site (*www.mhhe.com/BBNS*) offers exercises tied to each chapter; reference materials; and links to sites that provide tutorials and resources for more advanced Web work.

I hope you find that this book gets you into the exciting world of Web

news site development quickly and painlessly. Please feel free to share feedback with me by writing me at *mail@thomlieb.com*.

Thom Lieb, 2000

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Steve Konick of Turner Consulting Group also proved to be a tremendous help. Not only did Steve read just about every word of the book and offer detailed criticism, but he also answered countless questions about Web design using Macintosh computers (I'm a Wintel slave, myself).

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Finally, I need to thank my spring 2000 News Editing class for serving as guinea pigs in using this book and for finding many, many typos – thereby saving me a great deal of embarrassment.

CONTENTS

Preface vii

Acknowledgments ix

Chapter 1

Introduction to Web Publishing 1

The Process of Web Publishing 1

The Road Ahead 3

Chapter 2

HTML Basics 5

So Just What Is HTML? 5

Creating HTML Files 7

The Essential Tags 8

Nesting 11

HTML Tips and Keeping Up 12

Chapter 3

Creating a Basic News Article 13

Creating an Article 14

Adding Breaks and Paragraphs 15

Formatting a Byline 16

Adding a Headline 17

Changing Font Size 18

Changing Typeface 19

Previewing a Page in a Web Browser 20

Chapter 4

Advanced Article Formatting 23

Creating a List 24

Creating a Link to Another Web Page 25

Creating a Link to Send Email 26

Adding an Image 27

Making an Image into a Link 28

Creating a Horizontal Rule 29

Indenting a Block of Text 30

Positioning an Item 31

Chapter 5
Designing with Tables 33
Basic Table Structure 34
Customizing a Table 35
Using a Table for a Photo and Cutline 37
Formatting an Article with the Table Tag 38
Nesting Tables 39
Building a Front Page with Tables 41

Chapter 6
Checking Your Work 49
Checking Spelling 49
Validating HTML Code 50
Checking Links 51
Previewing Files Across Browsers 52

Chapter 7
Deploying a Site 55
Site Architecture 55
Finding a Host Server 56
Gathering Information 57
Acquiring FTP Software 58
Time to Connect 58
Creating Directories 61
Uploading Files to a Server 62
Downloading Files from a Server 63
Registering a Domain Name 63
Getting the Word Out 65

Chapter 8
Creating Web Graphics for News Sites 69
File Formats and Web-Safe Color 69
The Clear Dot 70
Text Graphics 72
Vertical Bars 73
Image Maps 74
Photos and Other Existing Images 75
Reducing Graphic Size 77
Copyright Issues 78

Chapter 9
Finding Related Materials 81
Start with a Question 81
Types of Search Engines 82
Advanced Strategies 83
Evaluating Information 84
Creating Related Links for an Article 85

Chapter 10
Adding Audio and Video 89
Listening In 89
When to Add Audio 90
Audio Step by Step 90
Looking In 95
When to Add Video 95
Video Step by Step 96

Chapter 11
Testing and Updating a Site 101
Designing a Testing Plan 101
Updating a Site 103

Appendix A
HTML Equivalents in WYSIWYG Programs 107

Appendix B
The Five Essential Commands 109

Appendix C
Deprecated HTML Tags 111

Appendix D
XHTML 113

Appendix E
Using Fetch for FTP 115

Appendix F
HTML Cheat Sheet 119

Appendix G
Further Reading 123

1

Introduction to Web Publishing

Not long ago, publishing the news was simple: Words were typeset and published in newspapers and magazines. Now it's not unusual for many people to do much of their reading on a computer screen.

Good journalism still rests on the same principles: clarity, precision, solid research. But in addition to possessing those skills, journalists today also often are expected to have a rudimentary knowledge of the technical aspects of online publishing.

Even if you have no intention of working in online publishing, it's worth your time to learn the basics. From the mid-1990s to early 2000, the number of newspapers publishing online soared from a few dozen to nearly 4,000. Throw in hundreds of magazines and newsletters – and new publications that never have seen print – and you're looking at plenty of job opportunities in the years ahead. Even radio and television news operations are setting up online operations; two prime examples are *cnn.com* and *msnbc.com*. So chances are strong that if you work in or plan to work in journalism, you'll do at least some work that will appear online.

In addition, if you're interested in advertising or public relations, it's still well worth your time to learn how to build a news site. Web sites also have become a vital outlet for news about companies and organizations. Intranets – Web sites designed for the employees of an organization – also have become a common part of the business landscape.

The Process of Web Publishing

Web publishing is both very similar to and very different from print publishing, and it involves several steps. This book deals only with the final stages of Web building. If you plan to build Web sites, it's highly recommended that you spend the time to read additional books and online articles on Web content and design. Two books to get you start-

The Process of Web Publishing

ed: "Creating Killer Web Sites" by David Siegel (Web site: *www.killersites.com*) and "Writing for the Web" by Crawford Kilian. Another great reference is Jakob Nielsen's "Designing Web Usability."

As in any publishing operation, the first step in creating a Web site should be developing a mission statement. Doing so gives you the opportunity to determine the purpose of the site (should it inform? entertain? sell products?), determine how it differs from its competition, and identify the audience you're trying to reach. Ultimately, focused content makes a Web site succeed or fail. No matter how much work you put into it, if there's no reason for visitors to return, they won't.

The next step is to decide on a basic graphic design for the site. To a large extent, your audience and purpose will determine the design. The ESPN site (*espn.go.com*), for example, is packed with dozens of links and little fancy technology; its visitors tend to information-hungry fans who want to get their fix of data as quickly as possible. On the other hand, the Cartier diamond site (*www.cartier.com*) is designed with elegant simplicity, in keeping with the products sold by Cartier. It also uses high-tech features in line with the educational levels and technological knowledge of its customers.

Once a design is prepared, it's a good idea to create a paper prototype of the site. Creating such a hand-drawn template lets you see the basic look of the site and check that it's easy to navigate.

The final part of the process is covered in this book. It consists of creating Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) files and building and testing the site. This consists of four steps and requires a range of different software products:

1. Web files are created, using an HTML editor (e.g., Bare Bones Software's BBEdit or Allaire HomeSite), word processor (e.g., Microsoft Word), or WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) Web creation software (e.g., Macromedia Dreamweaver). If graphics, audio or video are required, those files are created in other programs.

2. Files are checked carefully, and previewed in a variety of Web

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browsers (e.g., Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Internet Explorer) on both Macintosh and IBM PCs.

3. Files are sent to a server, using file transfer protocol (FTP) software (e.g., Fetch for the Macintosh and WS-FTP for Windows PCs).

4.Testers are employed to make sure the design of the site is logical and all features work.

The Road Ahead

The chapters that follow walk you through those four steps, giving you enough of the basics in each area to develop an advanced Web site. All this is done in a manner designed to build your skills as quickly as possible. So fasten your seatbelts as we begin our warp-speed tour of the skills needed to build basic news sites.

2

HTML Basics

The easiest way to build Web pages is to close this volume right now and run out and buy a program such as Macromedia's Dreamweaver, which lets you build beautiful and complicated Web sites with no programming. I've used Dreamweaver myself to start building several Web sites, and it has proven very easy to use.

Notice, though, the phrase "start building" in the previous sentence. Inevitably, any time I've tried using Dreamweaver or another WYSIWYG program to build a Web site, I've always had to bail out and do hand-coding at some point in the process to get the precise effect I wanted. Even more importantly, if I didn't have a basic understanding of Hypertext Markup Language, I wouldn't have known where to start in designing some of the more complex pages I've worked on.

So, my advice to you is this: Spend the time to learn the basics of HTML. Later, you can pick up a program like Dreamweaver, Adobe's GoLive, Net Objects' Fusion or Microsoft's Front Page and do most of your work using it. But when that program balks, you'll be able to get under the hood and correct the problems by hand.

So Just What Is HTML?

The HTML specification was designed to let users create files that would appear the same to people with all sorts of different computers. HTML files are not graphic files, such as those produced by programs like PageMaker or Quark XPress produce. Instead, HTML files are plain text files that function as a sort of recipe. The receiving computer follows the recipe to recreate the document envisioned by the person who created it.

HTML files always contain at least a few HTML "tags" (commands). They also can contain:

So Just What Is HTML?

- text that is to appear on a page

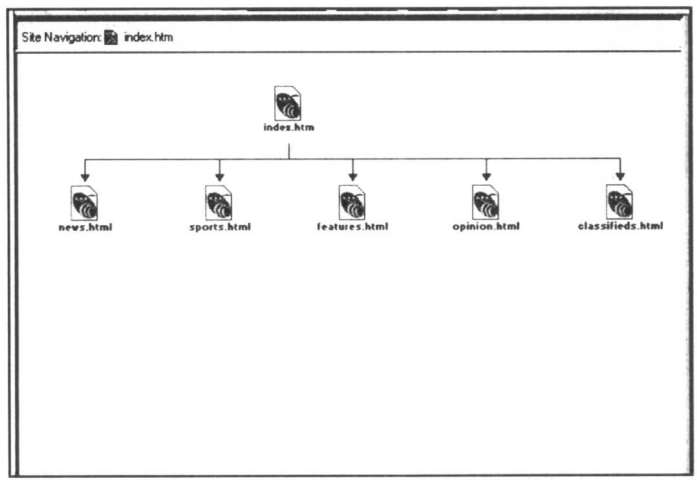
- page layout instructions

- instructions on where to find graphics to display on the page; and

- programming used for special effects and information retrieval and processing.

The greatest innovation in HTML was the use of hyperlinks, which allow the reader to navigate from a page to another related page with a simple click of the mouse – even though the pages might be on computers thousands of miles apart. Creating hyperlinks is easy, as you'll see in Chapter 4. What may be more difficult is understanding how the hypertext structure works in creating a Web site. An example should help.

Let's say you're building a basic Web site for The Daily Bungle, a small newspaper. The online edition will have news, sports, features, opinion and classified sections. To create that site, you'd begin with a front page, which would link to the front page for each of those sections; each of those pages would, in turn, link to other pages containing individual articles. Graphically, a site map for the front page and the section front pages would look like this:



Each of those pages is a separate HTML file; to create this site, you would need to create six different files, with additional files for each individual article those files link to. Because things can become complicated quickly, it's always a good idea to begin any Web project with a site map, so you can see how the pieces will fit together.

Creating HTML Files

The best way to create a Web page with HTML is to use a dedicated HTML editor. If you use a Windows PC, one of the most respected HTML editors is Allaire's HomeSite. If you work on a Mac, the favorite is Bare Bones Software's BBEdit. Both of these offer a wide range of features that make Web building relatively painless. Both also are relatively inexpensive, and a stripped-down version of BBEdit (BBEdit Lite) is free from *www.barebones.com/free/bbedit_lite.html*. Another free and very good HTML editor is HTML-Kit for Windows, available from *www.chami.com/html-kit*.

But you don't need anything fancier than a simple word processor – Notepad, installed on every Windows PC, is popular – to create a Web page because all you're creating is a page full of plain text. There are only two important rules in creating a Web page with a text editor:

1. Do not include any formatting.

2. Save the file as *Text Only* (or *ASCII*) with the file extension of .html

The HTML code itself is relatively simple. In most cases, you accomplish an effect by using a pair of matched tags around the text they apply to. Tags generally come in pairs. Both tags are enclosed in angle brackets, with the closing tag including a slash after the opening bracket. So to create bold text, for example, the code would read:

This is bold text.

We're obviously not talking brain surgery here (although your brain might hurt when we get into more advanced HTML later on). And

there are not even all that many tags in widespread use.

The Essential Tags

We'll start with a few vital HTML tags. Unlike most of the tags, these don't have anything to do directly with the content of a page; rather, they're used to structure files properly and make them accessible to Web searchers.

<!DOCTYPE HTML PUBLIC "-//W3C/DTD HTML 4.0 Transitional//EN" "http://www.w3.org/TR/REC-html40/loose.dtd">

The DOCTYPE tag appears at the top of an HTML file and indicates what version of HTML the file is based on. This version of the DOCTYPE tag indicates that the file is based on HTML 4.0, a widely used version of the HTML specifications. The "transitional" designation allows you to fudge a bit on some features that HTML 4.0 doesn't strictly recognize. Notice there is no closing tag.

<html></html>

After the DOCTYPE tag, the opening HTML tag should be the first tag in the file – and the closing HTML tag should be the last tag in the file. The tags signal the start and end of a Web page to the browsing software. The opening tag says, "An HTML page is starting here," and the closing tag says, "That's all, folks!"

<head></head>

The head tag sets off an area at the beginning of an HTML document where some housekeeping is done. Anything that appears in this section of an HTML document will not appear in the main browser window. The two main divisions of the head section are the title and the META tags.

<meta>

The META tag provides information for search engines to help find the page. The tag is useless on its own, and must include one of the following attributes. Unlike other tags we'll look at later, the META tag should not include multiple attributes; instead, it's OK to include multiple META tags, each with a different attribute.

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