



Terror or Accident? *Newsday* and the Crash of American Airlines Flight 587: Background

The Founding of *Newsday*

Less than six months after Harry F. Guggenheim purchased a makeshift newspaper plant that had once belonged to S.I. Newhouse's failed Nassau *Daily Journal*, the inaugural, typo-ridden issue of *Newsday* rolled off the presses on September 3, 1940. It was headquartered on Long Island and, though its readership was centered there, the paper hoped to compete with the best of the Manhattan dailies. Though the paper was widely seen as a ploy to keep Guggenheim's wife, Alicia Patterson, occupied and out of trouble, Patterson had journalism in her veins—her father founded the New York *Daily News*, her aunt helmed the Washington *Times*, and her cousin ran the *Chicago Tribune*—and her journalistic ambitions found a perfect outlet on Long Island, whose population boomed in the post-World War II years. Soon, *Newsday* had become the dominant voice of the community.¹

After Patterson's sudden death in 1963, the conservative Guggenheim hired a young Bill Moyers as its publisher, but Moyers' left-leaning politics and his stance on the Vietnam War proved problematic. Moyers left the paper in 1970. In 1971, Guggenheim sold *Newsday* to the Los Angeles-based Times Mirror Company. Editor and publisher David Laventhol ran the newspaper for the next 16 years, greatly widening *Newsday's* range. He added a Sunday section, expanded the staff and set up bureaus in Washington and abroad. By the mid-1980s, *Newsday* was so profitable that its 265 pages did not have enough room to meet advertisers' demand.²

¹ For more on the founding of *Newsday*, see Robert F. Keeler's *Newsday: A Candid History of the Respectable Tabloid* (New York: William Morrow & Co), 1990.

² Richard Perez-Pena, "After Years of Turmoil, *Newsday* Prepares for Another Owner," *New York Times*, May 26, 2008.

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This streak did not last, however. Despite its storied record, 19 Pulitzer Prizes and its reputation as an incubator for talents such as Gail Collins and nationally-syndicated cartoonist Walt Handelsman, *Newsday's* fortunes waned significantly after circulation began to decline in 1993.³ In 2000, *Newsday* was bought by the Tribune Company and, like so many regional newspapers, it struggled to stay relevant in a rapidly changing media market. Its efforts, however, ran up against the Tribune Company's need to cut costs. The international bureaus were shuttered, and the staff shrank from 500 to less than 300. Efforts to expand into the New York City boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, though technically part of Long Island, did not bear much fruit.⁴

Despite its troubles, however, *Newsday* remained the country's 10th largest daily by circulation. It was first among suburban newspapers.⁵ After the 1996 launch of its website, *Newsday.com*, the paper also maintained a robust presence on the Web.

Newsday.com

The *Newsday.com* website grew out of an earlier, subscription-based incarnation. In the fall of 1990, responding to concerns that the telecom industry was starting to dabble in information-delivery technology and thus threatened to cut into the paper's advertising revenue, *Newsday* Editor-in-Chief Tony Marro formed a task force to examine how to deal with the impending competition for ad dollars. The team, made up of *Newsday* editorial and business staff, reported back in 1992 with a recommendation that the newspaper adopt electronic publishing. The Times Mirror Company, which was simultaneously exploring ways to get its other publications like the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Hartford Courant* involved in the nascent Web, provided the financial and institutional support that led to the launch in late 1993 of *Newsday Direct*.⁶

Newsday Direct was a subscription-based model and was soon superseded by the open-source Web. In January 1996, *Newsday.com* went live with a basic HTML interface. The site, one of the first newspaper websites in the country, consisted of about three articles per news department and was updated once a day, at midnight. There was no video, no audio, and only minimal graphics.⁷ It was staffed by half a dozen people under the leadership of the site's editor and general manager, Peter Bengelsdorf.⁸ *Newsday's* classified advertisers in the print edition were

³ Pulitzer Prizes list, <http://www.pulitzer.org/cgi-bin/query.cgi?E=1&X=0&searchtype=1&Q=newsday&FormsCheckbox1=1&words=0&case=1&FormsButton2=Search>. Accessed on July 7, 2008. Also, author's interview with then- Deputy Business Editor Ernest Sotomayor in New York, NY, on July 8, 2008.

⁴ "Audit Bureau of Circulations Releases *Newsday* Audit," <http://www.accessabc.com/press/press111604.htm>. Accessed on July 7, 2008.

⁵ Tim Arango and Richard Perez-Pena, "3 Moguls in Talks to Buy *Newsday*." *New York Times*, March 21, 2008.

⁶ Author's interview with then-*Newsday* Director of New Media Fred Tuccillo in New York, NY, on July 16, 2008.

⁷ Author's interview with Jonathan McCarthy in New York, NY, on July 10, 2008. All further quotes from McCarthy, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

⁸ McCarthy interview.

given the option of displaying their ads on Newsday.com for an additional fee, which provided enough revenue to keep the Web operation largely “in the black,” according to Howard Schneider, then-managing editor of *Newsday*.⁹

Six months after the launch of Newsday.com, TWA Flight 800 left New York’s John F. Kennedy Airport and exploded in mid-air, crashing off the coast of Long Island on July 16, 1996. It was *Newsday*’s turf and the new website performed admirably, drawing a marked increase in traffic, much of which continued to visit the website even after the news event was over.¹⁰ One of the site’s earliest and most popular features was an Associated Press wire feed (interestingly, the AP did not yet have a website). Newsday.com cemented its reputation as a place for wire news in 1997 when the President Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal broke, and the later famous Drudge Report linked back to Newsday.com’s wire feed.¹¹ Traffic continued to grow exponentially and, over the course of the first 18 months of the site’s operation, the number of Newsday.com daily visitors tripled.

Newsday.com: Long Island and Queens. Newsday.com’s staff was based at the main *Newsday* headquarters in Melville, Long Island. By 2001, there were about three dozen people working on the site, including advertising and design specialists. Newsday.com also had a page dedicated to New York City, NewYorkNewsday.com, which covered news from Manhattan and the Outer Boroughs. That page had its own staff, who were based in the Queens Bureau of *Newsday*, in Kew Gardens. In 2001, the four Queens Web writers and editors sat in the same newsroom as the print staffers.

Tensions flare. Newsday.com’s innovative use of newswires, growing online readership, and financial solvency placed it squarely at the forefront of the development of Internet news. Despite its trailblazing innovations, however, Newsday.com faced stiff resistance from the print reporters in the newsroom. Reporters and editors had trouble seeing the importance of the Internet and why it was pertinent to their work. They were likewise wary of sharing scoops with the Web staff and breaking news online, fearing that it would give away their stories to the competition or that the Web staff would distort the story beyond the reporter’s control.¹²

Tellingly, the half dozen Web editorial staffers based at *Newsday*’s Long Island headquarters sat scattered among the print editorial staff before, in 1998, being shipped off to a separate building altogether. (The two newsrooms were later integrated.) “We didn’t go to news meetings and they didn’t tell us what was going on,” recalls Newsday.com’s executive producer

⁹ Author’s interview with Howard Schneider in New York, NY, on July 10, 2008. All further quotes from Schneider, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

¹⁰ Tuccillo interview.

¹¹ McCarthy interview.

¹² Author’s interview with Melanie Lefkowitz in Melville NY, on July 23, 2008.

Jonathan McCarthy. “And then we moved to a separate building... and we spent the next few years walking over [to headquarters] for every meeting.”¹³

Newsday’s executive leadership, however, says it tried to integrate the website into the paper’s daily operations. “If we were supposed to be successful from an editorial point of view, then we were going to have to mobilize and energize all of the content resources we had,” says Schneider. “To replicate a separate group of people to go out and report the news made no sense. A) We were already doing it; b) we didn’t want a two-tiered system of world-class journalists in the newsroom and... baby reporters on the Web with no experience.”¹⁴

But integrating *Newsday.com* into the newsroom proved difficult. Unlike the Web staff, much of the newsroom was unionized, making the separation legally necessary.¹⁵ *Newsday’s* executive management saw the website as ancillary to the paper, a way of attracting additional print subscriptions. Mutual resentments began to grow. *Newsday* print staffers resented the increased workload from contributing copy to the website; *Newsday.com* employees began to feel like “second-class citizens,” and suspected that the print staff was purposely sabotaging their efforts to move the website ahead by shirking requests to file copy for the Web.¹⁶

Sharing scoops and exclusives with *Newsday.com* proved a major point of contention, especially as Web updates became more frequent and as traffic continued to double annually.¹⁷ This put more pressure on the Web team to build on their successes, and on reporters to break more news online. Some print reporters, however, found the idea unpalatable and refused to file for *Newsday.com*, while some editors looked the other way. “I think our editors were smart enough not to make it an official thing,” says police reporter Melanie Lefkowitz, explaining that, though editors tried to cooperate, many “just kind of hoped that [reporters] wouldn’t do it again. You know a big tactic [for reporters] was, say yes, and then just don’t do it, which was probably a wiser tactic than refusing.”

This frustrated the Web staff, who had their own deadlines to make. “At one point, the only way that I could get some things done was to go to the editor and say, ‘Look, this is your job. You have to enforce it because I can’t do it.’ I physically couldn’t do it,” recalls Amanda Barrett, the Internet news manager for *NewYorkNewsday.com*.¹⁸ Diane Goldie, the website’s deputy online editor and Barrett’s supervisor, became so frustrated with this state of affairs by 2001 that she

¹³ McCarthy interview.

¹⁴ Schneider interview.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sotomayor interview.

¹⁷ “We now had a 24-hour platform, but we were afraid to break news because we would give the competitors news before the paper came out,” says Schneider. “The paper was still at the center of the world, and therefore we didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize the paper.”

¹⁸ Author’s interview with Amanda Barrett in New York, NY, on July 17, 2008. All further quotes from Barrett, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

decided to change her strategy: “I limited my begging to once a day in the meeting. And if I didn’t get it, we just did it ourselves.”¹⁹

***Newsday* and September 11, 2001**

The stand-off between print and Web reporters dissolved, however, under the impact of a national tragedy. Just after a quarter to nine on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, Deputy Online Editor Goldie heard an explosion from her apartment. It was American Airlines Flight 11 slamming into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, but Goldie thought it was a bomb.²⁰ “I called Amanda [Barrett],” Goldie recalls. “I said, they’re blowing up the World Trade Center.” The *Newsday* Web team sprung immediately into action. “We had it up [on *Newsday.com*] within three minutes of the plane hitting the building,” Goldie says of the site’s response. “We were the first ones, and we were online for Chicago and LA and all of them.” Goldie lived five blocks from the World Trade Center and was able to send Barrett updates on breaking news as they occurred.

As the enormity of the day’s events became clear, *Newsday*, including its Web teams in Queens and Long Island, kicked into crisis mode. Diane Davis, the deputy metropolitan editor for the print edition, helped manage the herculean task of collecting, processing, and organizing information (“feeds”) from reporters in scattered locations, and formulating them into coherent news articles.²¹ Davis, who usually started the day by calling her reporters and assigning them stories and locations for the following day’s paper, sent dozens of reporters to cover different angles of a massive event. The imperative that morning, Davis says, was getting reporters to the scene as fast as possible. “The number one rule is go,” she says, “because you have to get there when it’s happening. You can never get those moments back if you lose ground.” Reporters’ assignments ranged from covering Ground Zero, the FBI, and City Hall, to tracking down victims and their families.

Once the reporters were on the scene, they began calling in feeds to editors back in Queens and Long Island, and Davis had to organize how best to take in that information and store it in a central location. Using the HERMES content management system, Davis labeled each feed with the reporter’s initials and the topic covered, a label known as a “slug.” It was then accessible in the central database to any editor or writer for use in compiling a story. Each slug was also grouped under different mega-stories, or “budgets,” some of which were open to all while others were in private “queues.” Stories were quickly edited and checked against other articles to catch contradictions, mistakes, and the like. Meanwhile, editors looked for matching photography, art or graphics that not only fit with an individual story but was also synchronized with the paper’s

¹⁹ Author’s interview with Diane Goldie in New York, NY on July 18, 2008. All further quotes from Goldie, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

²⁰ Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W.W. Norton), 2004, p. 7.

²¹ Author’s joint interview with Diane Davis and Internet News Manager Barrett in New York, NY, on June 12, 2008. All further quotes from Davis, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

overall coverage. Simultaneously, the Web staff updated Newsday.com with breaking news, often using the same slugs as the print staff.

In a hectic newsroom that was simultaneously working on Web and print editions in a fluid crisis situation, it was vital that everyone followed the same protocol. This was a marked departure from reporting on a regular day. “Reporters are, in some ways, more used to working on their own,” Davis says. “I go out, I cover stories in my notebook, I go back, I write the parts I want to tell you. And a story like this... you couldn’t just keep it to yourself. It had to be something that you shared with a team because many people were looking at that information for many different things.”

9/11 on the Web. Newsday.com had become fully automated less than a month before the terrorist attacks. This meant several Web staffers could access and update the site at once, and they no longer had to manually code everything. Though this made Newsday.com easier to manage, the staff was still learning how to deal with the new software.

The automation, however, allowed the Web team to update *Newsday’s* site almost instantaneously with news flashes, giving visitors to the site almost live coverage—a first for the Internet. “We were able to keep the site moving from all over the place,” Newsday.com Executive Producer McCarthy recalls.

It was all Ground Zero, all the time, and we were able to put so much more content out there...We did updates. We did advisories. We did live running stories about the missing, and we built a database of the missing on the fly. We had slide shows of all the pictures...You had so much stuff that you had to get out there that...by the time you turned around and looked at the home page, there was just so much information out there.²²

Newsday.com attracted so many information-hungry visitors on 9/11 and in the chaotic aftermath that the site crashed several times.²³

As the Web staff rushed to keep up on 9/11, the fear and confusion of that day inevitably seeped into some of the online coverage, leading to small but significant mistakes. In the first hours of the crisis, for example, Newsday.com initially reported that a small plane had crashed into the World Trade Center, rather than the much larger, fuel-laden Boeing 767.²⁴ There were also reports of a bomb at the White House, reports that ultimately proved false.²⁵

²² McCarthy interview.

²³ Barrett interview, July 17, 2008.

²⁴ Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 4.

²⁵ McCarthy interview.

At other times, there were conflicting reports swirling about the newsroom—that more planes were headed towards New York City, for instance.²⁶ Unlike a normal print cycle where a story would have time to mature and pass through several editorial layers, the Web team had to make the call to run the story or not right then and there. McCarthy says that, in updating such a rapidly evolving story so frequently, the Web team tried to be as transparent as possible about its coverage. “We had this advisory box on the page, that you would just type in like two sentences to let people know what was going on,” he says. “And if we found out that we put up something that wasn’t true, we would just write back like, oh, this is false, this what really happened.”²⁷

Some mistakes, however, proved stickier than others. Internet News Manager Amanda Barrett, new to the job and responsible for many of the updates that day, remembers one such incident: CNN reported that a fire truck had been found in the rubble at Ground Zero, and Newsday.com decided to go with the story. It soon proved untrue. Barrett rewrote the story, but the mistake came back to haunt her. “It really stuck with us because it was mentioned a couple of times to me by staffers, who didn’t work on the Web, who said that we were fast, [but] we weren’t thorough,” she says.²⁸

Though the speed and intensity of the Web coverage of 9/11 drove many staffers to exhaustion, the experience of covering such a huge and fluid event brought Newsday.com fully into the new-media era. “All of a sudden, there was this need to know,” McCarthy says of the experience. “And it was kind of crazy.”

The Rockaways. One area of Long Island was especially hard hit by the 9/11 attacks. Many of the police officers and firemen who died in the World Trade Center collapse lived in the predominantly Irish-Catholic Rockaways, located on the Rockaway Peninsula of Long Island. Fully two months after the attacks, the St. Francis la Sales Church of the Rockaways Belle Harbor neighborhood, for example, was still holding funerals for 12 rescue workers recovered from the rubble.²⁹ Though they were remote and difficult to reach from other parts of New York, the Rockaways were located in the borough of Queens, making them part of *Newsday’s* home turf. In the months after September 11, the paper covered the local fallout from the attacks extensively.

The Players

Amanda Barrett. In 2001, Amanda Barrett worked as the Internet news manager in the Kew Gardens, Queens, bureau of *Newsday*. Young and a relative newcomer, Barrett had a background in features and sports editing. Her duties entailed updating the

²⁶ Sotomayor interview.

²⁷ McCarthy interview.

²⁸ Barrett interview, July 17, 2008.

²⁹ Brendan Brosh, “N.Y.’s Other Ground Zero,” *New York Daily News*, November 12, 2007, p. 1.

NewYorkNewsday.com website, rewriting stories, coordinating photos, and running the AP wire feed on the site. She reported to Diane Goldie.

Diane Davis. Davis, a veteran beat reporter, was deputy metropolitan editor for the newspaper and worked under Metropolitan Editor John Mancini at the Queens bureau.³⁰ Davis' responsibilities included planning stories, developing the paper's line-up, assigning reporters to stories and locations, and coordinating those stories with appropriate art and photography. Though Davis and Mancini worked on the print edition of the paper, they coordinated their efforts with the Web staff, who often consulted with them on Web stories.

Diane Goldie. A veteran journalist, Goldie began her career at the South Florida *Sun-Sentinel* before moving on to a decade-long stint at the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver and, eventually, the New York *Daily News*. By the time she started at Newsday.com as an editor in June 2001, Goldie had almost two decades of daily reporting and editing under her belt. Used to a fast pace, she found the *Newsday* culture to be far more conservative and deliberate than the hectic newsrooms she was used to. In addition, working in a news organization resistant to new media, Goldie felt unwelcome and that she was not accorded the respect that her experience and years in the field had earned her. She worked at *Newsday's* Kew Gardens, Queens, bureau.

At Newsday.com, Goldie supervised Web writers Amanda Barrett and Vera Haller. She reported to Debbie Krenek, the associate editor in charge of *Newsday's* Internet component. Krenek, in turn, reported directly to Howard Schneider, *Newsday's* managing editor.

Beth Holland. A longtime *Newsday* staffer, Beth Holland in 2001 was a part-time assistant editor at the Kew Gardens bureau. In that capacity, she could be variously an assigning editor, copy editor, and re-write person.

Melanie Lefkowitz. Lefkowitz started as a police reporter at *Newsday* on September 11, 2000. Before that, she was a reporter for the *Providence Journal* in Rhode Island.

Jonathan McCarthy. In 2001, Jonathan McCarthy served as the executive producer for Newsday.com. He had been there since the website's early days, having arrived in November 1996 after a short stint at the *New York Times* Magazine Group, where he learned HTML and other Web skills. At Newsday.com, McCarthy tried to integrate the Web team into the main newsroom, a process that he found challenging and politically fraught. He also integrated coverage for NewYorkNewsday.com, which appeared as a separate page within the main Newsday.com home page.

³⁰ Mancini later became *Newsday's* editor-in-chief.