



Charting a Course for Change: Transforming the Albany *Times Union* in a Wired World Epilogue

Instead of focusing on just one of the priorities the Prometheus Project staff had identified, Editor Rex Smith decided—to the extent possible—to move on all four fronts simultaneously. “We’re doing everything,” he says.¹ By February 2008, the *Times Union* had taken important steps towards completing the necessary tasks confirmed by Consultant Patti Myers’ process map: retrain staff, buy a new CMS program, reassign reporters and redesign the newsroom.

Managing Editor Mary Fran Gleason continued to be in charge of the Prometheus Project. Her team addressed the physical challenges by spending \$220,000 on new furniture which, says Smith, helped to “reshape the physical form of the newsroom to accommodate new jobs.” The “flexible” furniture, as Smith termed it, would have the capacity to “change again in the future.” The team also replaced dozens of desktop computers with laptops in order to make reporters more mobile; invested in several video editing stations; and eliminated file cabinets throughout the newsroom.

Meanwhile, the team used the process map to redraw the workflow within the newsroom. Step one in changing work processes was to buy a new CMS to improve communication among editors and reporters as stories evolved over the course of a day or a week. It would also streamline the relationship between Web and newsprint stories. A new system was installed in June 2008. “The new process,” explains Smith, “will enable us to prepare content more quickly for online use, including more multimedia content, and make for more seamless print production.” Gleason made a presentation on the new workflow at the paper to an American Press Institute seminar.

1 Rex Smith at Columbia Journalism School discussion, February 27, 2008, and in an email exchange on July 11, 2008. All further quotes from Smith, unless otherwise attributed, are from these discussions.

Retraining and reassigning reporters posed more of a challenge. Because the Albany Newspaper Guild was well-established at the *Times Union*, editors could not simply change titles or write job descriptions where none had existed without extensive negotiations. So they started negotiations, which were ongoing in mid-2008. Meanwhile, Smith and Publisher Mark Aldam decided to expand job assignments to accommodate multimedia work. For example, a feature writer—as an expected part of her job—produced an online feature called “Nightcam,” which took readers to bars, clubs and other nightspots. The sports columnist wrote a blog. All reporters were expected to contribute to the local politics blog. That meant giving up some of what they had been doing in print in order to make time for the additional online work, but the trade-off seemed essential.

In early March 2008, a newsroom team led by Executive City Editor Teresa Buckley proposed a new newsroom organizational structure. The new approach would emphasize the print sections less, and topic areas more. Thus, instead of three reporters each writing about health policy for the business, metro and feature sections respectively, one writer could serve all three. The new structure was implemented over the course of the year.

The *Times Union* invested in other technology besides the CMS. They purchased, for example, small, reasonably good videocameras. For the time being, says Smith, “we deliberately don’t use top-quality video. It’s YouTube quality” because that is what news website consumers expect. The paper planned to stay atop reader expectations, however, upgrading its video equipment as needed, as well as providing advanced training to staff. The paper simultaneously launched a redesign of its website, which was done by June 2008. Smith cautioned against hoping for too much from a Web redesign, however. “I think Web design is a minor element,” he says. Far more important, he says, are search engines, and ensuring that readers can find what they want when they want it.

The paper’s leadership meanwhile continued to argue for a new printing press. Some 94 percent of the paper’s revenue continued to come from print advertising, while online advertising contributed only 6 percent. It would be years before Web revenues matched those from print. In the meantime, it was important to produce a credible print product; the old press “could barely do color,” says Smith. In May 2008, the Hearst Corporation agreed to contribute \$60 million toward a new press. With the new press operational, the newspaper would be in a position to take on commercial print jobs—a possible source of additional revenue.

The *Times Union* could not, however, escape the general malaise affecting the newspaper industry. Between October 2007 and March 2008, circulation fell three percent. The same month it invested in a new press, the newspaper also announced plans to eliminate six percent of the workforce, offering voluntary buyouts to up to 30 employees. Smith was hopeful that the combined changes would leave the *Times Union* in a competitive position. But the process, he recognized, would be neither swift nor easy: “We’re in Year Two of a 15-year transition.”