

New site promotes journalists as individual brands

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(AP) -- First came bylines for once-anonymous journalists. Then came their photos, particularly as news shifted online, and blogs began to carry mug shots of their writers.

Now, the journalist is about to continue that evolution from off-stage to center stage as a new Web site promotes the concept of the "entrepreneurial journalist."

Founded by a veteran of [traditional media](#), Lewis Dvorkin, True/Slant wants its writers to be more than just a name and a mug shot.

Contributors are encouraged to think of themselves as individual brands and to build a community of readers around their writing.

"The journalist becomes his or her own brand of one," Dvorkin said in an interview. "It's about them - their knowledge, their expertise and their credibility. And audiences can gravitate to that and be part of the news life of the contributor."

The concept is one of myriad experiments going on across the Web as the traditional media industry founders grapple against the realities of free online news and cheap online advertising.

The Huffington Post, for instance, has been aggregating news from other outlets, complemented with original blog posts, while ProPublica, a nonprofit Web site supported by The Sandler Foundation, teams up with

newspaper reporters on investigative projects.

With True/Slant, writers combine original reporting with commentary and links to headlines from around the Web.

The Internet's ability to give readers a greater voice is a big part of the formula.

The 100 or so writers at True/Slant - among them some bold-faced names from the traditional media such as CNN, Rolling Stone and Newsweek - are contractually obligated to engage with readers. They must flag a certain number of comments per month as noteworthy by highlighting them in their posts on the site.

True/Slant's writers can also manage their comment sections, in contrast to the free-for-all, unmoderated approach that many other Web sites take. On True/Slant, the writers can bring more germane or insightful comments to the top of the list while booting others.

The site's business model is unusual. With the launch of its "beta" test coming Monday - the site already has been up and running in a more rudimentary "alpha" form - the site will carry regular display ads. But marketers will also get their own pages on the site, just as contributors do.

Dvorkin said the idea has received some "really, really interesting and positive reactions" from advertisers, though the company wouldn't disclose who they are, citing ongoing discussions. "Every marketer is looking for something different than a traditional display ad to get their message across," he said.

Still, the site's relationship with its stable of writers may be its most novel aspect, highlighting the kind of media fragmentation that

continues as online news and debate becomes ascendant.

Some writers receive monthly stipends. Others get incentive-based pay, driven by the traffic they pull onto the site. But they also have the option of sharing advertising revenue and taking an equity stake in the company.

In other words, for those writers who choose to take on more risk, it's sink or swim.

Where [journalists](#) once hoped to climb aboard an established news brand with its own weight and credibility - and steady salaries - and then forget about the business side of things, True/Slant's contributors have to build their own audience and derive a living from it.

True/Slant is simply there to provide the online architecture and tools for publishing reporters' material.

Dvorkin, who held editing jobs at Forbes, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal before moving to AOL news, is betting reporters and readers will like things better that way.

"From my 35 years in this business, from traditional to online, it is very clear that audiences are moving online and moving toward individual voices," he said. "They want to hear a voice they respect and that can cut through the noise of the Internet."

Miles O'Brien, a former CNN veteran who now freelances in broadcast, offers a kind of test case for how reporters use the site.

He started writing at True/Slant a few months ago with a focus on aviation and space travel. High-profile news like the recent airplane crashes and repairs to the Hubble Space Telescope have driven traffic.

But he has also learned to promote his work, getting the word out through the social-messaging service Twitter and asking friends to trade links.

"After 17 years at CNN I've sort of discovered this entrepreneurial gene," O'Brien said.

He doesn't expect the site to provide his entire income, but supplement other online and documentary work.

"It's difficult to go through a transition like this," he said. "But I can see a general schematic at least of the future, and it's a pretty exciting one."

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