

AP proposes new article formatting for the Web

July 10 2009, By ANDREW VANACORE , AP Business Writer

(AP) -- The Associated Press is proposing that publishers attach descriptive tags to news articles online in hopes of taming the free-for-all of news and information on the Web and generating more traffic for established media brands.

Tags identifying the author, publisher and other information - as well as any usage restrictions [publishers](#) hope to place on copyright-protected materials - would be packaged with each [news](#) article in a way that search engines can more easily identify.

By doing so, the AP hopes to make it easier for readers to find articles from more established news providers amid the ever-expanding pool of content online. That, in turn, could lead to more traffic and more online advertising revenue for a beleaguered news industry.

If widely adopted, the tags should help computers better understand more information about a story, allowing Google and others to develop smarter [search tools](#).

"As things stand, an awful lot of information on a news article is completely invisible," said Martin Moore, director of Media Standards Trust, which jointly developed the new rules with the AP. "A search engine is not able to tell a byline from someone who is referred to in an article."

Although it is difficult to know how the extra information will change

the way readers find online news, Google Inc. and others could conceivably develop search tools that would allow users to identify stories by a specific writer or from a specific city. Web portals could use the data to add more detailed summaries under search results.

The AP, which is already testing the tags on its own stories, says it wants to make its proposed format the industry standard, to be used by anyone producing news content, including other news outlets and bloggers.

The formatting is part of a broad effort by the AP to shift the dynamics of news on the Web.

Traditional news outlets have complained that search portals like Google are too indiscriminate in their displayed results, leaving established news brands lost in the din of press releases, advertising and outdated material. As a result, traditional media sites are getting less traffic and less advertising revenue, which many companies sorely need as the recession accelerates the decline of print revenues.

Todd Martin, the AP's vice president for development, described the new tags as "a nutritional label for your news."

And the tag identifying usage rights could allow Web sites that aggregate content to automatically sort articles by copyright terms and let publishers more easily track how their stories are being used, said Srinandan Kasi, AP's general counsel.

Still, it is unclear exactly how publishers would use the extra information to enforce copyright terms. It's a touchy subject that has sometimes pitted news outlets and blogs against one another.

Robert Cox, president of Media Bloggers Association in New Rochelle, N.Y., said that tagging articles in general poses no threat to blogs, but

that any copyright provisions will be viewed warily by sites that have already clashed with the AP.

In one case last year, the AP demanded blogger Rogers Cadenhead remove several postings that the AP claimed violated its terms of use. Other bloggers rallied behind Cadenhead, arguing his activity fell under the "fair use" provision of copyright law.

With any new proposal from the AP on copyright protections "the perception in the blogosphere is going to be that this is one more way for the AP to go to war," Cox said.

Kasi would not elaborate on how the tags might someday protect unauthorized use of copyright-protected content.

Known as microformatting, the tags provide a prepackaged set of information that can be read by computers but would be largely invisible to users.

Rather than simply letting Web crawlers try to sift through pages to find the information on their own, the formatting would show where and when an article was published, what the article is about and what terms of use are attached. It could also carry a statement about the news and ethical policies of different outlets.

The standards the AP is proposing were developed with the Media Standards Trust, a British nonprofit aimed at supporting high journalistic standards.

Google, which licenses AP content for its Google News section, signaled recently that it would like to see more Web publishers adopting such formats. A post on a company blog said microformatting "will help people better understand the information you have on your page so they

can spend more time there and less on Google."

In a statement, Google did not commit to using the tags but said it "welcomes all ideas for how publishers and search engines can better communicate about their content. We have had discussions with The Associated Press, as well as other publishers and organizations, about various formats for news. We look forward to continuing the conversation."

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Citation: AP proposes new article formatting for the Web (2009, July 10) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-07-ap-article-formatting-web.html>

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