

# Hartford Courant competitors seethe over Web site

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Manchester Journal Inquirer managing editor Chris Powell poses in his office at the family-owned newspaper in Manchester, Conn., Tuesday, Sept. 1, 2009. Powell says that the aggregation strategy being used by the Hartford Courant is "economic theft". (APP photo/Bob Child)

(AP) -- After cutting its newsroom by half because of the recession and sagging advertising revenue, The Hartford Courant found a new source for news - its competition - and found itself in a plagiarism scandal.

The episode began this summer when The Tribune Co.-owned [newspaper](#) began summarizing or rewriting other newspapers' stories and putting them on the Courant Web site. The company defended that as a legitimate practice.

But its competitors and some journalism experts said it wasn't so

innocent, because the Courant was using stories right from its own backyard rather than around the country.

"They can't afford to cover local [news](#) anymore," said Chris Powell, managing editor of the family-owned [Journal Inquirer](#) newspaper in nearby Manchester. It covers dozens of communities east of Hartford, producing stories about town budgets, school boards and other municipal functions while the Courant has closed bureaus in the area. "People want local news, so they'll steal it from their competitors. I see it as nothing more than theft."

Powell's newspaper, which makes news on its Web site available only to paid subscribers, complained to the Courant last week, and followed up with a Page 1 story. It pointed out that some stories the Courant posted from other newspapers on its Web site later appeared in print editions of the Courant with attribution stripped off, or changed to the Courant.

In Friday's newspaper, the Courant's CEO and publisher, Richard Graziano, acknowledged that the Courant had plagiarized its competitors. He apologized to readers in a note on the opinion page.

"We are taking corrective action to prevent it from happening again," Graziano wrote.

Graziano's apology appeared to be referring to the fact that online stories landed in the newspaper without proper attribution, and it's not clear whether the newspaper still plans to aggregate news from its competitors - and give them credit - online. Since the criticism of that practice emerged, the newspaper's Web site has ceased running such stories. But Courant executives did not return calls seeking comment about whether this was a permanent or temporary change.

Online aggregators, such as Google, Huffington Post and the Drudge

Report, link to news from multiple sources. Many newspaper blogs do it, too. And some newspapers share material willingly, to help each other broaden their coverage.

But online aggregation can be controversial if the creators of the original material believe that the aggregator's summaries are thorough enough to dissuade readers from going to the source's own Web site. That loss of traffic can kill ad revenue.

For instance, in December, newspaper publisher GateHouse Media Inc. sued The New York Times Co. over The Boston Globe's practice of running headlines and lead sentences from GateHouse stories on its Web site. The case was settled before going to trial.

The resolution didn't settle the broader question of how much material blogs and news sites can grab from other sites when they also provide links to the original stories. The Associated Press has been an especially vocal critic of the way that some sites aggregate news without paying for it. The AP, a not-for-profit cooperative owned by newspapers, has sued some online aggregators and urged other sites to reduce how much AP content they reproduce, even when they link to the underlying material.

Tribune Co. has stood by the idea of aggregating content on its Web sites in Hartford and elsewhere. Tribune, which is operating under bankruptcy protection, also owns the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, The Sun of Baltimore and other newspapers and 23 TV stations.

"Aggregation is something that we are engaged in at all of our newspapers," Tribune spokesman Gary Weitman said. "It is completely appropriate and enables us to provide a broad array of news stories to our readers, viewers and online users."

The Courant, which won Pulitzer Prizes in 1992 and 1999 and prides

itself on being the nation's longest continuously published daily newspaper, announced its Web aggregation plans in July. In a memo describing the role of the "aggregation editor," Editor Naedine Hazell said the person would collect and rewrite other newspapers' content "to broaden the news we offer readers online and in print."

Since then, the Courant has posted numerous stories on its [Web site](#) that were based on material originally written by newspapers in Torrington, Bristol, New Britain, Waterbury, Stamford and other places. The stories appeared in the main news section of Courant.com, mixed in with articles that were reported by the newspaper's own staff.

In some cases, each paragraph of the story was attributed to the originating newspaper. At other times, the Courant has published just headlines and brief summaries on its Web pages, along with a link to the originating newspapers' Web sites.

Journalism professor Jerry Dunklee at Southern Connecticut State University said that even before the Web stories landed in print, the Courant was violating ethical and legal standards by aggregating local competitors' online material.

"When they cut back staff and take smaller newspapers' and radio stations' reporting, even if they identify the reporter and news organization ... they are still taking that material that they should be covering themselves," Dunklee said.

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