

A digital dilemma: As news migrates online, journalism expert sees strong niche for small markets

July 24 2012, By Tyler Sharp

(Phys.org) -- Recent economic turbulence and the pressures of an ongoing news cycle have forced some daily newspapers to re-examine their business models and change how they deliver news, according to a Kansas State University newspaper expert.

Newspapers in several [major cities](#) across the Southeast, including Birmingham and New Orleans, recently announced the end to daily publication. Instead the newspapers publish thrice weekly and provide more news coverage on their respective websites. The decisions have caused concerns for [journalists](#) and [community members](#) alike.

But Steve Wolgast, assistant professor of journalism and [mass communications](#) and director of Student Publications Inc. at Kansas State University, says journalists and community members do not need to worry, provided journalists understand how best to deliver [news content](#) to readers.

"You have to understand your own market," Wolgast said. "What does the market want and what are they willing to pay for what they value?"

Wolgast said small-market newspapers often have a limited number of news sources to work with in their community, helping to maintain a high number of readers who want to remain aware of what's happening locally. The lack of other options for coverage ensures their survival for

[future generations](#).

"Where else are you going to find news about your town of 500 or 5,000? It's not covered by bigger papers or television unless something unusual happens," Wolgast said.

Such papers may decide to go online in the future to minimize printing and distribution costs. But for now, they have flexibility in how they can best reach their audience, according to Wolgast.

Conversely, newspapers in larger markets like Birmingham, New Orleans and Detroit have struggled because of the availability of [community news](#) from an assortment of [news sources](#).

"The challenge is for a publisher. How can a newspaper still make money selling information about things that a journalist or publisher may believe is important to a town? There are so many other places to get information that people are less likely to solely rely on a newspaper's website," Wolgast said.

Nonetheless, many newspapers have focused their efforts on adding value to their websites and developing new methods to not give away their online content for free. If a market has an audience that values a certain type of information or the quality of information, that can be an opening for a publisher to charge for an online subscription, Wolgast said. Quality of information follows a model used by the [Wall Street Journal](#) and *New York Times*, which have limited access to their online content and require readers to pay to read full articles.

Pay walls have experienced a surge in popularity with many newspapers, boosting their online presence. *The Wall Street Journal* has featured a pay wall since 1997. Meanwhile, the *New York Times* implemented its pay wall in March 2011. The success of both suggests an important

quality of news consumers, Wolgast said.

"People are going to pay for well-written, reported and timely information because they need to it make decisions about their lives, about their businesses," he said.

Wolgast spent nine years at the *New York Times* working as a news design editor for nearly all of the paper's desks. He has also worked at the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the *Casper (Wyo.) Star-Tribune*, the *Akron (Ohio) Beacon-Journal* and the *Topeka Capital-Journal*. In addition, he worked internationally at the *Baltic Independent in Tallinn*, Estonia. He has served as the director of Student Publications and the adviser to the *K-State Collegian* since 2009.

Provided by Kansas State University

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