If the twenty-first-century news business has a Zapruder film, it’s an eight-minute Flash-based movie called EPIC 2014. For reasons that will soon become obvious, it has not received a lot of attention in the mainstream media (MSM in “Web-ese”), but has propagated quietly among news geeks since it was released online in late 2004. I first saw it last year at a “Whither the News” klatch at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York, where glum top editors from the major dailies and news networks gathered with sallow, unmistakably smug representatives of the digital world.

EPIC, which is composed almost entirely of simple text, graphics, and narration, launched the proceedings, and I think it would be fair to say that it rocked the world of the MSM mandarins. This was because, speaking from the prospective perch of 2014, it mapped out in calm detail exactly how the MSM would meet its doom. Eighteen months, and hundreds of millenarian prophesies later, EPIC 2014 (and its updated version, EPIC 2015, released in 2005) already seems quaint, even a bit absurd. And its camp retro-futurism (Toffler by way of Epcot) is much funnier now that I’m watching it on my computer and not with ashen-faced news execs. The movie, ostensibly a product of the fictional Museum of Media History, begins:

In the year 2014, people have access to a breadth and depth of information unimaginable in an earlier age. Everyone contributes in some way. Everyone participates to create a living, breathing mediascape. However, the press, as you know it, has ceased to exist. The Fourth Estate’s fortunes have waned. Twentieth-century news organizations are an afterthought, a lonely remnant of a not-too-distant past.

In 2008, we learn, Amazon and Google merged to form Googlezon, which allowed this most excellently named new conglomerate to use its “detailed knowledge of every user’s social network, demographics, consumption habits, and interests to provide total customization of content and advertising.” Six years later, Googlezon has launched the ultimate killer app: EPIC, or “Evolving Personalized Information Construct,” a “system by which our sprawling, chaotic mediascape is filtered, ordered, and delivered.” Under EPIC, anyone can create news, the users subscribe to independent editors based on their interests, and everyone is paid from the billions in advertising Googlezon sells across this vast mediaverse. The film ends with an Orwellian prediction—“EPIC is what we wanted, it is what we chose, and its commercial success
preempted any discussions of media and democracy or journalistic ethics”—and a joke:


As a piece of pop futurism, *EPIC 2014* is both brilliant and brilliantly self-subverting (at once inevitable and preposterous). But what’s remarkable is how many of its ten-years-out predictions have already come true—if not materially, then de facto: the mass migration of everything to the Web, the explosion of blogging, the near-instant embrace of social media (see YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, Wikipedia), the growing sophistication of Google’s AdWords and AdSense (the latter soon to be extended to user-customized RSS file format and other feeds), the TiVo-ization of television, and on and on. Instead of buying Amazon, Google bought YouTube, an Evolving Personalized Information Construct that didn’t exist in 2004—GoogleTube instead of Googlezon. Thus does two-year-old futurism already seem hopelessly recherché.

The Times Company hasn’t thrown in the towel, but it is inarguably in extremis. It plans to cut more than 1,000 jobs in the next two years, and its profits continue to fall along with its stock price; only the most purblind of optimists could deny that this is a harbinger of further miseries. A study released in late October by the Audit Bureau of Circulations showed that daily newspaper circulation had dropped about 2.8 percent over the previous year, while Sunday circ dropped 3.4 percent. More worrisome, the Project for Excellence in Journalism noted in its annual report on newspaper audiences, this slide is both persistent and accelerating:

In 2004, the newspaper circulation losses that had been building slowly over 15 years began to accelerate. In 2005 things got roughly three times worse.

This would seem like the moment to get on my high horse and defend the daily newspaper, with its omnibus approach to everything from your town to the world, its high/low pastiche, its editorial ordering function that allows readers to weigh and sort multitudinous news inputs into a coherent worldview. But this is what I would call, to borrow a Wall Street term, sell-side logic. It flatters the people who have a vested interest in preserving the gatekeeper function and the economic margins provided by dead-tree media, or who see newspapers as a cultural bulwark against the barbarians. The barbarians, on the other hand, don’t seem to care; they’d rather get the news they want, not the news the mandarins say is good for them.

And while it’s true that fewer and fewer people are purchasing newspapers, it’s also almost certainly true that more and more people are reading news. This thanks to portals, newspaper Web sites, search engines, syndication feeds, and millions of blogs—a goodly percentage built on the hard labor of professional journalists, whose work the bloggers link to, praise, mock, and recombine with the hard labor of other professional journalists. Meanwhile, many of these blogs, produced on the cheap, have become profitable businesses that generate virtually no revenue for the journos who provide the constantly updated fodder. Feasting on the rotting corpse, if you will, while making polite chitchat.

For all the many things blogs do, their most disruptive application has been to provide an alternate portal into news, bypassing, or “disintermediating,” the sorting traditionally done by newspaper editors and TV news producers. Drudge, Huffington, and their tens of thousands of less-popular competitors effectively offer alternate front pages targeted to audiences grouped by similar interests and affections. And because most newspapers (and their dot-coms) have so far been too proud to integrate the work of other
publications, the smartest blogs can provide deeper and wider-ranging news experiences than any individual newspaper does. John Vinocur writes a great weekly column for the International Herald Tribune, but anyone who cares about Europe can tap hundreds of other sources in a matter of minutes.

Meanwhile, top reporters and columnists at major newspapers are realizing (or will realize soon) that their fates are not necessarily tied to those of their employers. As portals and search engines and blogs increasingly allow readers to consume media without context or much branding, writers like Thomas Friedman will increasingly wonder what is the benefit of working for a newspaper—especially when the newspaper is burying his article behind a subscriber wall. It will require only a slight shift in the economic model for the Friedmans of the world to realize that they don’t need the newspapers they work for; that they can go off and blog on their own, or form United Artists—like cooperatives to financially support their independent efforts.

So what should newspapers do? They could stop printing. It may happen eventually, or perhaps newsprint will find a financially sustainable market among the elite and elderly (or perhaps it will have a nostalgic vogue not unlike that of, say, heirloom tomatoes), but that’s not what I’m getting at. The current Web-publishing model that newspapers are using isn’t likely to become financially viable anytime soon. With few exceptions, the media businesses thriving on the Web either are low-cost blog-like efforts or follow a many-to-many model, in which communities create, share, and consume content. Publishing an article on the Web gets you one click; getting your users to write the article for you gets you a thousand clicks, and costs less to boot. In other words, turning your users into contributors increases their engagement with your site—each click is, after all, also an “ad impression”—while simultaneously generating more content that you in turn can sell to advertisers.

That, I’d venture, is how you start rethinking the newspaper business. Not only do you allow your reporters to blog; you make them the hubs of their own social networks, the maestros of their own wikis, the masters of their own many-to-many realms. To take but one example, Kelefa Sanneh is the pop-music critic for The New York Times. He is very likely the best music critic in the country, and certainly the best new Times music writer in years. Let’s say that Sanneh creates his own community around the music he likes. Or The Washington Post Dana Priest creates an interactive online universe around her intelligence reportage. With editorial oversight only for libel and factual accuracy, Sanneh or Priest are allowed to do whatever they want on their sites (while their mother ships pour their resources into marketing them). In Sanneh’s case, allow other people to write music reviews under the Times/Sanneh “brand.” In Priest’s case, turn the site into a clearinghouse for global intelligence information, rumors, conspiracy theories, and so forth (obligatory disclaimer: “The views of posters do not necessarily represent those of the Washington Post Company”). Go even further: incentivize the critics and reporters by allowing them to profit based on the popularity of their sites; make it worth their while to stick around.

Gaming this out in the most baldly capitalistic fashion, the papers then stand a chance of transforming one Sanneh review (one impression) into the organic back-and-forth of social media (1,000 impressions). This, in turn, would allow The Times (or The Post) to start achieving the scale, and the cost efficiency, that make online publishing profitable. In fact, there’s a rough model for this emerging already: it’s called About.com, a desperately unglamorous site that features hundreds of freelancers who can tailor their part of the site to the needs and desires of their users. The Times bought it last year for $410 million, and it is currently the company’s primary growth area.

Playing this logic out, the next task would be uniting the Sanneh or Priest site to the Times or Post whole. You could essentially self-syndicate, sending your regular Times or Post headlines to Sanneh’s and Priest’s
sites, luring readers back to the mother ship while increasing the number of times each story is read. Indeed, the logic could be (and in some circles already is being) played out even further. What if you essentially exploded the central function of the newspaper and “microchunked” (to borrow a current term) the content, syndicating all of it to bloggers or other news sites in return for a share of any advertising revenue each site generates? The Associated Press has made this the centerpiece of its digital-age strategy: it recently signed a potentially breakthrough deal with Google, in which Google will pay the AP for access to its stories; and the AP has launched a broadband player that Web sites can use to access AP video content. Its content goes where the readers are, and the AP gets paid, no matter what. Remarkably, this most old-school of services is a lone bright spot in the MSM landscape. The AP’s revenues have increased from more than $593 million in 2003 to more than $654 million in 2005; its digital revenue grew at a rate of 66 percent from 2004 to 2006. Of course, the AP has always been a syndicator, so no conceptual leap of faith (indeed no leap whatsoever) was required to move the business from analog to digital.

The Times, in particular, seems increasingly aware of the gargantuan leap of faith it will need to make to avoid the curse of EPIC 2014. If you go to the Times site, you can find a button on the top navigation bar for something called “My Times.” The paper is promising “a new service that lets you create a personalized page with what you like best in The New York Times and your favorite sites and blogs from all over the Web.” (If it works, I still intend to take credit.)

So what does this mean for newsprint? Counterintuitively, I’d argue that this disaggregation strategy could provide a renewed logic to the printed product. As news itself becomes more of an instantly available commodity, readers will crave an oasis of coherence and analysis (which is also why books, and magazines like The Atlantic and The New Yorker, are potentially brilliant counterprogramming for ADD’ed info burnouts). Online news, microchunked, consumed on the fly, is fast food; the newspaper, fed by its newly invigorated journalist-brands, is the sit-down meal. In this marginally more optimistic future history, the roles of print and digital are inverted. Original news—in the form of stories, postings, and community—begins online, while print offers an intelligent digest/redaction that readers—and not only the elite and elderly—can peruse at their leisure. You could even call it Reader’s Digest.

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