

MEDIA

The tomorrow of newspapers

Online newspapers may be all the rage today, but they're only one of a host of possibilities for the medium's future

IT IS DECEMBER 1, 2004. The world has changed significantly since the last days of John Major's Conservative regime. We were told then that within a few years, online newspapers would become the norm; that we'd all be reading our "convergent" newspaper media (text, image and sound combined in a "multi-medium" format) from a giant computer screen on the living room wall, or using a portable tablet.

Of course, in the mid-1990s advocacy of the Internet was still pretty strong. But this hadn't taken into account the many other developing communications technologies such as wireless computer networks, global satellite networks and multi-media digital broadcasting that emerged at the end of the century.

In fact, in recent years, the ways in which we receive information have become almost limitless; and because of global multi-media competition, they have also become very cheap. Now, for the news consumer, the message really is the message, as Walter Bender, an academic at MIT Media Lab News in the Future, first said almost 30 years ago in Boston, USA.

However, there were new problems associated with this new consumer power: it did not take long before people realised they were receiving too much information. Many began to depend on "agents" (filtering elements contained in computers which shape the kinds of media we consume). Some people chose to personalise completely their online newspapers, instructing their agents to select only the

stories in which they were interested. These were the so-called "Daily Me" readers.

But the majority continued to read printed newspapers (though sales for the tabloids were down 89 per cent from 1994, according to figures from the Interactive Audit Bureau of Circulations); watch television (choosing from some 10,000 channels); and access news and entertainment from online services, video on demand channels and digital broadcasting.

The new "printed" newspaper breakthrough came a couple of years ago in 2002 with the invention of a cheap, reversible and re-usable fibre material with a high enough colour print quality to withstand repeated print-outs at home.

This invention took place at the same time that "agent" technology was developed at the Guardian Media Lab so that printing, editing and newspaper layout were automated to a standard that could produce the "personalised" newspapers you are reading today.

This latest convergence couldn't have come any sooner: the growing desire to return to a tactile media was a trend noticed by many meta-research centres in the early months of 2003; as was the nostalgia for a time when newspapers represented understandable qualities. "The newspaper is not just a computer filter, it brings depth, meaning and context to information — something that the electronic agents fail to do," media analyst Roy Greenslade wrote in Guardian World Media on line in March 2003 (a view that was backed by almost



367,000 positive e-mail messages, according to Mori Interactive).

online news services are, of course, useful instant sources of information. However, they still suffer from portability problems in comparison with old-fashioned newspapers. And the steal-a-data-tablet fashion (known as "RAM raiding") that began in 2002 intensified the need to find cheaper forms of portable media.

This quest became more urgent with the publication of Professor Kelvin MacKenzie's seminal work, *Off-line Or Not Electronic Media Sucks — What Went Wrong With The Electronic "Daily Me"?* MacKenzie's ground-breaking work on the personalised online newspaper concluded that their failure was due to the simple fact that most people don't know what they want in a newspaper until they get it. In other words, there should be an element of surprise in a news product. It was also discovered that most people preferred print to screen-based media. That is why the "printed" Guardian 2004 includes elements of personal news, lifestyle and features choices from the Guardian Media Group online database, and the Guardian's own selection of important news stories told in a Guardian style appropriate to the particular reader (this is the so-called "serendipity" or "Daily Us" option).

The Guardian agents inside the home printer/multi-media module allocate a reading time length for the newspaper; editorial-to-advertising ratios; a facts-to-comment ratio; permitted interruptions to the readers' normal choices; and a "preferred metaphor" option. Advertising — display, classified and sponsorships — is personalised and monitored, so readers can track their consumption levels against the ads they have seen.

Today in 1994, you will receive

eighties yuppie, turned North Oxfordshire video-financier — is an Arsenal fan, and his lead story is about his club's exploits in Europe.

And 64-year-old Maggie Gratham, a retired former TUC deputy leader, is content in Provence, and still enjoys her fantasy wage bargaining games with comrades around the world. She is most interested in the Irish peace process, and the contribution of "successful over 70" George Bush.

It is now 8.31am and you are about to leave for work. You don't have time to sit down with a cup of coffee and read the entire printed Guardian paper (that's for the weekends), so you print out your G2004 at home, or grab your Guardian news access card and print out at the local news agent. There you slide the card into the Guardian electronic kiosk, unlocking the security pass into your personalised news account. The newsagent hands you your personal newspaper, printed on re-usable paper.

Welcome to the newspaper of the future.

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If you wish to receive the other three Guardian 2004 papers, write to: Mailshot Services Limited, 6 Bushey Hall Road, Bushey, Watford WD2 2EA