

An Educated Audience

A typical reader of a hard-copy publication belongs to a mere audience, while a typical reader of a website can belong to a community

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For more than a decade, proponents of online communication have held out a vision of how a hard-copy publication can complement itself by creating a website and making proper use of it. *THE NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION* might be well-equipped to be among the first to actually fulfill this vision.

The proponents have based this vision on their analysis of the differences between a hard-copy publication and its web presence. Their analysis has gone as follows: A hard-copy publication and its web presence are fit to perform significantly different tasks. The first is fit for hub-to-spoke communication, with room to print only a bit of spoke-to-hub feedback, such as a few letters to the editor. And a hub-to-spoke model seems to be relatively hierarchical. This isn't because hard-copy editors are imperious by nature and so seek to hurl thunderbolts down on their readers without offering many readers a chance to hurl thunderbolts back into the hard-copy publication. It's just because paper is costly and so a hard-copy venue can't afford the space to print a lot of comments from its readers. But a website can offer an infinite amount of space for relatively little cost. So it can publish both a lot of material that runs from hub-to-spoke and a lot of material that runs from spoke-to-hub. This model can be less hierarchical than print and more collegial. A typical reader of a hard-copy publication belongs to a mere audience. A typical reader of a website can belong to a community. The website reader can be not only a consumer of information and analysis and opinion, but a producer of it as well.

Given this analysis, the vision is that the website can add a valuable complement to the hard-copy publication: If a hard-copy publication is akin to a town crier, its website can enable the people in the public square to respond to what the town crier says, comment on it and discuss it with one another. In this way, the site can build community and collegiality. It can be a marketplace of ideas, a forum that puts evidence and arguments to the test of different perspectives.

Turns out, though, it's far easier to express this vision than to implement it. Where there have been conspicuous efforts to follow it, as in the websites of national magazines and major newspapers, they have rarely worked as envisioned. Web readers aren't uniformly likely to speak up. To speak up, they must write in, and

many can't write clearly. Others write in, but chiefly to fire off insults or slurs. Far from civil discussion, this is electronic graffiti. So much for community and collegiality. And still others who join the discussion always grind the same axe or otherwise ignore the topic on the table. So much for a marketplace of ideas. To be sure, a website can screen for such lapses if it is closely and frequently moderated. But that level of moderation is expensive.

The readers of *NEJHE*, the hard-copy publication, share a strong and probably professional interest in the same subject. Exceptionally well-educated, they can write well. Indeed, a number of academics have already established widely read websites. In content, their sites usually focus on topics other than higher education. In style, however, they set an instructive example. Their writing consists of relatively brief observations that are made frequently and expressed colloquially. Also, *NEJHE* readers each know a lot about some facets of higher education, and can teach it to others. But they don't know everything about it and, as lifelong learners, are willing to add to their own knowledge.

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They form an already-existing community of interest that is cohesive, yet displays many different kinds of diversity. It shares a tradition of debate that is civil—but is debate nevertheless. To be sure, some moderation by the editor would be necessary. But it wouldn't have to be close and frequent. It could consist of suggesting topics for discussion and helping to direct and focus the discussion. For these purposes, the editor would act as an impresario. Finally, although the national *Chronicle of Higher Education* might at some point devote a portion of its website to fulfilling the same vision, it probably would be unable to overcome *NEJHE*'s franchise in the New England region. That portion of its website might do well instead to link to the corresponding portion of *NEJHE*'s site.

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