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Charting a Course for Change: Transforming the Albany *Times Union* in a Wired World

By 2006, newspapers across the United States faced a crisis of growing proportions, triggered in large part by the exploding popularity of Internet----based news sources. The Web was pushing traditional newspapers into uncharted territory, threatening them on the one hand with extinction but offering on the other a potentially wider audience than at any time in history. Newspapers suffered as they struggled to prevent the first and take advantage of the second.

The *Times Union*, the dominant newspaper in Albany, New York's state capital, was no exception. Circulation had dropped more than 10 percent from 1996, advertising dollars had declined, and the costs of running the newspaper had increased. Readers were migrating to the Web, but the *Times Union* had no clear plan how to use the new technology to maintain editorial excellence, serve readers, and still make money.

Ironically, in the late 1990s the *Times Union* had been cutting edge in its approach to the Internet. It had been among the first regional papers to use the Internet to reach readers and early on covered a major story on the Web with graphics, photographs and up----to----the----minute reporting. Multiple awards had recognized its entrepreneurial mettle. But by 2006, it was no longer a leader among newspapers its size.

Part of the problem was technology: Editor Rex Smith and other newsroom managers recognized that the newsroom's early 1990s----era content management system—which helped staff organize and share information—was inefficient and outdated. But process was also to blame. The workflow in the newsroom, established incrementally over the paper's 150----year history, no longer made sense. Existing procedures served a hot----type and printing press model, not an electronic one.

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But Smith had loftier ambitions than a technology upgrade or process redesign. He wanted to initiate nothing less than a wholesale overhaul of the newspaper's editorial model, moving it from a traditional print daily toward a hybrid print/online, round----the----clock product. As a first step, Smith and his new publisher, Mark Aldam, hired a consultant—Patti Myers—to map every aspect of the newsroom's process flow. A clear picture of the paper's current inefficiencies and redundancies would, they hoped, clarify its best path to the future.

When Myers delivered her findings in January 2007, their implications were far----reaching. To position the paper for success, Smith and Aldam realized they would need to reevaluate staffing needs, change job descriptions, retrain reporters, revamp the news production process, redesign office layout, and purchase new equipment—and that was just the beginning. While Smith and Aldam were eager to adopt an ambitious plan for change, they were leery of the potential costs—to staff morale as well as to the bottom line. Adding to the challenge, there were no role models; no newspaper had attempted to overhaul its editorial process in the exact fashion Smith and Aldam were considering. Over the next days and weeks, they would have to make critical decisions about which reforms to pursue and in which order—and which to put on hold or ignore altogether.

History of Success

The *Times Union* traced its history back to 1856, when three entrepreneurs rolled a four---page broadsheet off a letterpress in Albany's city center. At the time, dozens of politically partisan daily and weekly papers crowded New York's capital region. An emphasis on people, commerce and community distinguished the paper from the daily political content printed by competitors. This approach helped lift what was then known as the *Albany Morning Times* above the heap of failed penny press in the latter half of the 19th century, and by the early 1900s the paper had achieved a solid footing in Albany.

The *Albany Morning Times* grew up through the next several decades: It added a better printing press, hired experienced publishers, and bought out competitors. In 1891, the paper changed its name to the *Times Union*. During World War II, the paper earned world renown. The *Times Union* landed the first interview with famed scientist Albert Einstein in August 1945 after the US dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. A *Times Union* reporter tracked the famous professor to his vacation home in the Adirondacks, and was granted a rare face----to----face interview. The exclusive story was reprinted worldwide.

In 1924, the paper's aging publisher and owner sold the *Times Union* to newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst. This made the paper part of one of the most powerful media empires of the age. With market leadership and Hearst's deep pockets, the *Times Union* enjoyed decades of prosperity.

Calm Before Storm

When Rex Smith joined the *Times Union* as managing editor in 1995, the paper was thriving—as were most newspapers in the country. It boasted a circulation of 101,000 daily and 160,000 on Sunday, and had 146 employees in the newsroom.[1] The paper was a must----read for the capital's political leaders and its professional class. While it had some competition in the form of newsweeklies and other community daily papers, the *Times Union* dominated its news market.

The city it served was a major government and education center. Albany was often called the "most average city in America" because its 98,000 residents more closely mirrored national demographic averages than any other city. This made Albany, 136 miles north of New York City, a popular test market for new business and retail products.

Smith had earned a master's degree from the Columbia University School of Journalism before making his way up though the ranks of traditional journalism.[2] In the 20 years before joining the *Times Union*, Smith had led a small daily in Indiana and a community paper in the Albany region, had worked as a political consultant, and had reported more than a decade for *Newsday*.

Enter the Web

During Smith's first year as managing editor (the second most senior newsroom position), the newspaper industry still believed itself on solid financial ground. Although national newspaper circulation had been in gradual decline for over 10 years, advertising dollars generated by a 1990s technology boom had counterbalanced—and effectively masked—the losses. Many newspapers established online versions of their print product, but paper executives did not yet see the medium as a viable alternative for their readers, or as a threat to traditional streams of advertising revenue. For many executives, the rising cost of newsprint and a public too busy to read caused more alarm than the newly emerging phenomenon called the Internet.

But by 1997, the Web began to put pressure on newspapers' profits from classified ads. That year, Microsoft Corporation launched a Web----based daily newspaper called *Sidewalk*. Newspapers took notice, refused to provide Microsoft with content needed for the venture, and in the end *Sidewalk* failed. But the following year, two Stanford University students introduced Google, a search engine that allowed Internet users to find local events, classified advertising, and news—information traditionally provided by newspapers—with newfound ease. In the following years, it became hard to ignore Internet newcomers such as ebay.com (online auctions) and craigslist.com (free classifieds) that suddenly posed

[1] Audit Bureau of Circulations.
[2] Smith took high honors at Columbia.

competition for revenues that had long belonged almost exclusively to newspapers. It was far from clear, however, just how traditional newspapers could take advantage of the emerging technology—or whether they should. Discussions and predictions about the Internet and newspapers filled journalism magazines and emerged as a hot topic at industry conferences. At a 1998 University of California at Berkeley conference on journalism, industry experts talked about the promise and the threat of "new media." A columnist from the *San Jose Mercury News* told a panel that newspapers "...are going to have to just deal with it and recognize that the convergence of media forces is upon us."[3]

By the late 1990s, newspapers were becoming increasingly concerned about the future of their medium, realizing that what was being called the Internet revolution was not just hype. By 1999, 60 percent of papers with less than 500,000 readers had lost circulation. Weekday circulation remained at essentially the same level as 1955, even though national population had grown 64 percent over the same period.[4] As a former reporter wrote in the *American Journalism Review*, some of the reasons for the industry's circulation decline were beyond the control of individual publications. Changing lifestyles, with greater emphasis on out----of----home activities, made it more difficult for people to make time for a newspaper. Many dailies merged or closed while competition grew from broadcast, weekly publishing and, increasingly, the Internet.[5]

A 2004 book by Philip Meyer called *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* mirrored even greater soul----searching in the newspaper industry.[6] If one were to project forward from current circulation levels, Meyer predicted, the last ink----on----paper reader would give up the newspaper in April 2040. Part of the problem, Meyer wrote, was that in the new media world, the attention span of would----be readers was shrinking by the day. "In the cluttered information marketplace, where information itself is no longer scarce and therefore less valued," Meyer wrote, "the attention of the public has become the scarce good."

Nationwide, newspapers experienced their worst years in 2000----2002. The boom of the Internet economy in the late 1990s meant newspapers had enjoyed healthy advertising revenue, fueled by start----up companies which paid for classified ads to find employees and spent large advertising budgets in print mediums. But when the "dot.com bubble"—the Internet economy— collapsed at the beginning of the 21st century, those technology companies drastically curtailed advertising, and newspapers lost a source of revenue that had counterbalanced the losses from declining subscriptions. Advertising revenue dropped over 9 percent between 2000 and 2002, representing an historic $5 billion loss to the newspaper industry. The hardest hit area was help---wanted ads, which dropped by half in the same

[3] Comment made by Dan Gillmor at the 1998 Conference on Excellence in Journalism and the New Media, University of California Berkeley School of Journalism.

[4] Audit Bureau of Circulations.

[5] John Morton, "Bad news about newspaper circulation." *American Journalism Review*, July/August 1999.

[6] Philip Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age*. University of Missouri Press: 2004. Meyer was Knight Chair in Journalism at the University of North Carolina.

period.[7] The Web, meanwhile, did not seem capable of helping newspapers replace their shrinking revenues from the print product. While the surge in traffic to news websites after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, proved the Internet to be a popular and valid news medium, no one had figured out how to make newspaper websites profitable. Some newspapers tried asking readers to pay for news online, but most ended the approach when readers migrated to free news sites instead. Some advertisers considered shifting their advertising to newspapers' websites, but few were willing to pay much for online ads without a clear understanding of how many potential customers these ads would reach or what impact they would have. For a time, it looked as if the dire future predicted by EPIC 2014—a fictional newsreel in which Google, Amazon, and an army of amateurs eventually drive out even the *New York Times*—was not so far----fetched.

Facing the Future

Seeing year----over----year circulation declines at their own paper, leaders at the *Times Union* started to take a closer look at the Internet in the mid----1990s although—as at other papers—there was little clarity about how or whether the Web would improve the service the newspaper provided to readers. *Times Union* nonetheless launched its first website, timesunion.com, in August 1996. It was called ElectricTU and included classified advertisements and calendar listings.

That proved to be only a start. Over the next several years the *Times Union*, with encouragement and resources from its parent company the Hearst Corporation, developed and expanded its Internet operations in advance of most other regional newspapers. Most newspapers its size had little more on their websites than a community bulletin board and classified advertising modified for the Web. But the *Times Union* went further, emulating larger and richer papers such as the *Washington Post* in offering extensive archives, dedicated online teams, and links to reporters' email addresses. By 1999, the *Times Union* had a dedicated website staff of five—set up in the corner of the newsroom—to abridge news stories and post them quickly to the website. By the summer of that year, timesunion.com also offered interactive maps and online discussion forums. Soon after, the newspaper was named the best American online newspaper in its circulation class by the Newspaper Association of America, congratulated for its "superior design, in----depth content and focus on interactivity and community."

The *Times Union*'s online effort reached a peak in 2000, when a high----profile murder trial moved from Manhattan to Albany. New York City police officers had allegedly murdered immigrant Amadou Diallo. The trial landed in a courtroom whose judge made a rare decision to admit not just reporters, but cameras. Then----*Times Union* editor Jeffrey Cohen saw an opportunity to test the new Web medium.[8] Cohen dedicated a reporter to cover the trial for print, and for the first time, another to cover it only for

[7] Comments from Tony Ridder, chairman and CEO of Knight Ridder, October 8, 2003, at the National Press Club.
[8] Cohen left for the *Houston Chronicle* in 2002.

timesunion.com. In a radical departure from the usual job asked of reporters, staff writer Mark McGuire dictated stories—as often as six times a day—over pay phones to a Web editor back at the newsroom. Timesunion.com staff joined the paper's photographers at the scene and used new, 360----degree cameras to shoot demonstrations on the courthouse lawn. The video was posted on timesunion.com along with a courtroom diagram so Web readers could "explore" the room. As readers logged on to the site by the thousands, the *Times Union* team glimpsed the potential—and the threat—of the Internet. McGuire recalls thinking his job had changed and that "we were not just competing against other newspapers, we were now competing against TV."[9]

While the newspaper industry reeled from the "dot.com" bust, it looked as if the *Times Union* would weather the worst of the economic storm, maintain leadership online, and stay ahead of shifting media trends. Like many newspapers, the *Times Union* experienced a significant downturn, but it never lost money, and it remained one of the most financially successful of the Hearst papers. From the outside, it looked in 2004 as if the paper had emerged from the economic turmoil largely unscathed and with most of its staff—269 employees, 137 in the newsroom—intact. The newspaper had smooth relations with its labor unions, and contracts were negotiated without conflict. The *Times Union* managed to avoid layoffs; instead it took a number of steps to shave expenses. The paper's management raised subscription prices and discontinued weekly technology and children's sections. It reduced the number of newspaper and magazine subscriptions in the office, limited staff travel, eliminated staff coverage of the Olympics, and trimmed the size of the paper to cut newsprint costs.

Meanwhile, award trophies piled up in the editor's office. For its coverage of the Diallo case, the *Times Union* was recognized again with a top award by the newly----formed Online News Association in 2001. But looking back, Smith says the apparent equilibrium was unstable—like modeling in clay. "You just get the arm on and the head rolls off," he says. "You put the head back on and the leg falls off."[10]

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

By the time Smith was promoted to editor and vice president of the *Times Union* in 2002, the paper no longer led the online market. In fact, it had started to fall behind. Like many newspaper executives at the time, Smith was not sure how best to reach readers through the Internet, nor how many internal resources to divert to the website. Encouraged by strong reader response to the Diallo coverage, the *Times Union* produced a few multimedia stories on the same scale in the following years, but these stories failed to generate similar reader interest. Very few readers seemed to take much interest in exhaustively

[9] Author's interview with Mark McGuire on April 5, 2007, in Albany, New York. All further quotes from McGuire, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

[10] Author's interviews with Rex Smith, April 5, 17 and 18, 2007, in Albany, New York and phone interviews June 14 and 18, 2007. All further quotes from Smith, unless otherwise attributed, are from these interviews.

reported, online stories about Malawi, or a special project about the commercial center of Albany. Smith wondered if these types of stories were worth all the effort the newsroom poured into them.

The root of the problems, Smith felt, was that decisions about the Web had been made absent a long----term strategy; instead, the newsroom process had grown organically. "As the paper grew and got more complex, the system just didn't really adapt," Smith says. "There wasn't the pressure to make the change." Specifically, the *Times Union* had not figured out how to incorporate the Internet into its detailed operational structure. Smith saw the Web's potential to carry breaking news—something readers had come to expect—but the paper's old content management system (CMS) made it cumbersome to get news to the website quickly. Moreover, the paper's Internet group functioned much like another features department, rather than being embraced as a promising new channel to deliver all manner of news and services to readers.

Smith had a strong, even emotional, commitment to the role of newspapers in the community. For the *Times Union*'s 150----year anniversary in 2006, Smith was invited to the state library to look at the first edition of the *Albany Morning Times*. Holding the copy in his hands, he recalls "getting a lump in my throat." He wrote in an editorial later that week: "Our values remain fundamentally unchanged from those our founders laid out: to keep an eye on what goes on in our community, to bring readers the news they need to know, to act independently."

But he recognized that respect for traditional journalistic values was no longer enough. To Smith and other *Times Union* leaders, it was becoming clear that newspapers were confronting more than the kind of cyclical downturn seen in the past, and that in fact there had been permanent shifts in reading habits. Indications of a monumental change were becoming clear at the *Times Union*. By the end of 2006, website traffic was up to record numbers: TimesUnion.com had over 217,000 visitors a month, a 51 percent increase from 2002. By contrast, print circulation was just over 100,000, a 10 percent drop from five years earlier. To Smith and the team, these numbers showed that the newspaper's readers were changing their behavior and becoming more Web---dependent, even if the *Times Union* was not.

The *Times Union* needed a vision for the 21st century—or at least for the next five years. "We learned that we needed to pay more attention to the marketplace," Smith says. "We needed to listen to our readers. We needed to adapt to their changing lives and present what we hold to be important in a way that could be consumed by them." The question was: what vision, and how would the paper achieve it?

Room with a (Disturbing) View

From his glass----walled office, Smith could look out at the newsroom — an open space filled with sounds of clicking keyboards and ringing phones. To his ever more skeptical view, the newsroom editorial process seemed to have evolved to actually impede

efficiency. For example, the online team worked from one corner of the newsroom and operated as a separate entity from the rest of the group. Editorial assistants hand----carried faxes and deposited them in reporters' and editors' in----boxes on their desks, where the pages often sat for days, often because no one knew they were there.

Looking at this, Smith worried that readers would increasingly decide that the daily paper offered too little news too late. If that happened, he feared the paper would be forced to downsize, which in turn might force it out of business—as had happened at other publications. "If we weren't efficient, we were going to lose the ballgame," Smith says. "We simply wouldn't have enough people to deliver a product that was sufficiently differentiated in the marketplace to survive... In journalism, you can't cut your way to prosperity."

Smith and his team were fortunate that Hearst was a privately held company. Unlike public companies with their focus on short----term financial results, Hearst could make decisions about the newspapers it owned without pressure from stockholders to steadily increase the value of shares or dividends. It meant freedom to take risks, to strategize and set long----term targets with enviable flexibility. But no one knew what the strategy should be.

Role models? In late 2005, hoping to find a role model, Smith launched his own in----depth investigation of other newspaper websites. From his computer, Smith read online the Miami Herald, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post and others with content----rich, vividly illustrated websites. Some used audio, others were experimenting with video. "I saw the Miami Herald and the Los Angeles Times with all these fabulous multimedia platforms," he says. Some he admired; others, such as a piece by the Los Angeles Times on oceans, he thought readers would ignore. "The question was, to what extent were readers going to sit there and go through a multimedia presentation on this topic?" Smith says.

Smith also researched what wealthier, larger papers had done to reorganize their newsrooms to accommodate the Web, and whether that had persuaded advertisers to transfer their advertising dollars to the website. The *Washington Post*, for example, had drawn industry attention when it restructured its newsroom to better serve its website. From what Smith could glean from industry research and in conversations with his colleagues across the country, it was still too early to tell. While there had been missteps, there were indications that advertisers, if not readers, would help pay for Web----based news.

Smith considered how these approaches could apply to his smaller circulation, regional newspaper. For one thing, he could not lose sight of the fact that fully 94 percent of the organization's revenue continued to come from the print newspaper, and only 6 percent from Web advertising. Moreover, a January 2005 study had shown that 65 percent of *Times Union* readers depended on it exclusively for their news; they did not subscribe to another paper. So for a large number of customers, the print product was far from irrelevant. Smith likened his role at the paper to the captain of a ship, and felt like

the character in a children's book he kept in his office. But unlike a captain capable of plotting and changing the ship's course, Smith felt he had charge of an assembly----line factory; in fact, the paper was registered as a factory with the New York Department of Economic Development. "It's like the Ford production line model," Smith says. "You put on the nut on top of the bolt, and then somebody puts the next nut on top of the next bolt." Smith felt the ship needed to be turned around quickly, even if that meant some mistakes would be made. "You may not have figured out exactly what your precise proper tack is to get where you're going," he says. "But you eventually need to move, or you're going to lose the wind."

Pinpointing the Problem

As Smith came to understand the possible Web----enabled ways *Times Union* news could be delivered to readers, he decided it must first address its outdated technology. For example, its pagination system (an automated way to organize stories for print) was by 2006 nearly 15 years old. The program did not allow editors to easily see a final image of what a story would look like when published, nor did it accommodate quick and simple transmission of photos and stories from the field to the Web. Moreover, incompatibilities between different generations of Mac---- and PC---based computer systems in various departments made adding or editing photographs and graphics a headache.

However, the lack of a central repository to store information and facilitate communication—the purpose of a content management system—frustrated Smith the most. "There was no place where we could all turn to and say, here's a story idea, who's working on this?" he says. "We had circumstances where we ended up in the afternoon meeting, and there was a story that appeared on some editor's budget that another editor already had a staff person working on in a different way."

Without a single place for everyone to see assignments and information, staff manually moved information through the newsroom, one piece of paper and email at a time. Stories were emailed or hand delivered through a factory----like system of editors, reporters, pagination specialists and clerks. More than once, miscommunication led two reporters to appear at the same community press conference. Other times, the paper missed an important story because one person thought another reporter had it covered. "It's like the outfielder and the centerfielder both going for the fly ball, and each one sort of taking a step back expecting the other to get it," Smith explains. "The ball drops between the two." There were so many steps in the system that when mistakes were made, it was often difficult to pinpoint the source.

Inefficiencies extended to other parts of the newsroom. Smith recalls arriving early to the building and passing a printed photo assignment taped to the studio door for the first photographer to find. "It was just amazing that in the 21st century we were still depending upon a piece of paper taped to a door to communicate with someone," Smith

says. "What happens if the first photographer in the morning did have another assignment and never got to that note?"

In March 2006, Smith gained an ally. Hearst hired Mark Aldam, a young executive from the *Hartford Courant*, as publisher. Unlike his predecessor, David White, Aldam had instructions from Hearst to explore the creation of a hybrid newsroom and to give the Internet more weight and attention in the newspaper's operations. Aldam made it his goal to increase the newspaper's circulation through both print and online in order increase the number of adults the newspaper reached per week from its current 60 percent to 70 percent. In a radio interview eight weeks after his appointment, Aldam articulated his vision, which included better use of the Web: "Our Number One objective is the transition into new channels of distributing our content... giving it to consumers, readers, where they want it, when they want it, and how they want to receive it."

Taking Action

Aldam was eager to help Smith fix the inefficiencies in the newsroom. Aldam considered conducting an internal audit of newsroom functions, as the *Courant* had done. By doing a review in----house, the *Courant* had incurred few expenses and eliminated the risk that an outside consultant might misunderstand the paper's culture and goals. But Aldam thought that at the *Times Union* it would be "great to have someone's unbiased, objective point of view evaluating everything."[11]

Patti Myers, a newspaper consultant based in Cincinnati, had worked with the *Times Union* in 2004 to help streamline the operations of the advertising department. She had earned the trust of the group. George Hearst, great----grandson of William Randolph Hearst and vice----president, associate publisher and general manager of the *Times Union*, had hired Myers for that project. "She asked questions," Hearst says. "By being probed and torqued... she gets you to come down the path that is the most appropriate."[12] Hearst recommended the consultant to Aldam.

Aldam met with Myers in the summer of 2006 and then introduced her to Smith. "I found Patti [Myers] to be intelligent and engaging," Smith recalls. "She convinced me that enough change was coming that we had to really take a serious look at how we do things, that if [we didn't], we wouldn't be able to make the transition to a multimedia platform." Myers' specialty was mapping organizational processes and workflow in intricate, illustrated detail. George Hearst had suggested hiring Myers to look at the newsroom before, but

[11] Author's interviews with Mark Aldam, April 4 and 19, 2007, in Albany, New York. All further quotes from Aldam, unless otherwise attributed, are from these interviews.

[12] Author's interviews with George Hearst, April 6 and 18, 2007, in Albany, New York. All further quotes from Hearst, unless otherwise attributed, are from these interviews.

former Publisher White had been skeptical about consultants, believing their services were not worth top----dollar prices.

A Fresh Look From The Outside

Aldam hired Myers for the job in the late summer of 2006. He told Myers he wanted her research to help guide the newsroom executive team's decision on which CMS to select. Rather than choose a product and reorganize newsroom functions around it, Smith, Aldam and an advisory committee made up of newsroom leaders wanted to design the ideal newsroom, and then find a front----end system that fit. But even more than a recommendation for technology, Aldam hoped Myers' work would provide a platform for newsroom leaders to consider a total newsroom reorganization. "We wanted to be known as a content creator of value, not just a regurgitater of the same information you'd already heard or seen 24 hours earlier," Aldam says.

One challenge, especially for those in the business for many years, was to break free of a deep----rooted philosophy that newspapers could not make mistakes. Accuracy and detail—getting it right—was the *modus operandi* for most newspapers, including the *Times Union*. Smith describes his own drive for perfection with a story about how he once spent weeks considering whether to change the size of the paper's rule—lines separating stories—by a half point. "The culture of newsrooms and the drive for perfection inhibits creativity," Smith says.

Myers began studying the *Times Union*'s newsroom in August 2006. By November, she had conducted 69 interviews with staff, including managers and representatives from the photo, news and Internet departments. She carried out most interviews in groups and others in individual, one---- to two----hour meetings. Freely and anonymously, participants told Myers what aspects of their jobs worked well, and where they sensed the system suffering. It was the first time the staff had been able to pause and consider these issues. "Because people are trying to put out a product every day, it's hard for them to see all the steps that they really go through,"[13] Myers says. "What really happens when you look at current processes is that everybody agrees that, 'Yeah, this is complicated and complex,' but it's very hard for someone who is embroiled in it day in and day out to take a fresh look in terms of how it should be in the future."

Myers also tracked the beginning----to----end path a story took in the newsroom. She studied how a fax, email or news tip came into the newsroom, was passed to an editor, who passed it to a reporter, who wrote the story, gave it back to an editor, and so on. "Every place is unique," Myers says. "What was different [at the *Times Union*] was how high the walls were in terms of people seeing their department as an island."

[13] Author's telephone interviews with Patti Myers, May 7, April 11 and 26, 2007. All further quotes from Myers, unless otherwise attributed, are from these interviews.

At the same time, several *Times Union* managers traveled to another Hearst property, the *Houston Chronicle*, to discuss that paper's pending decision to buy a new CMS system. The Hearst Corporation preferred the papers make a joint decision in order to lower the overall purchase price. By September 2006, the *Chronicle* was ready to approve a vendor, but the *Times Union* team wanted to wait. In a memo that month to the *Chronicle*'s vice president of technology, Smith wrote:

> At the beginning of this month we began a process mapping study led by Patti Myers... The results of this comprehensive study of how we produce the newspaper will help us decide what process we want to follow going forward, and it is from that conclusion that we'll be able to then choose which vendor best serves that process. Without that study, I'm afraid we'd just be looking at various systems in the way someone going into a car showroom might be kicking the tires on one shiny car after another, without weighing whether that car will primarily be used for short commutes or long drives.

The findings. Myers presented the final maps of current processes to Times Union executives in early January 2007. At first glance, the process maps looked like hieroglyphics, with dots and squares and lines indicating flows of information and content. Some processes required several maps, long enough to wrap around the walls of a conference room outside Aldam's office. The findings were surprising to the team: in some cases, Myers found it took as many as 213 separate steps to get a story on the Web or into print. This was clearly unacceptable. "The processes and technology shouldn't interfere with doing good journalism for a newspaper, whether it was a print or an online newspaper," Myers says. "If they continued to have roadblocks because of antiquated processes and roles, they wouldn't attract the kind of journalists that were needed." Adds Smith:

> I was surprised at the level of complexity built into the newsroom. The number of manual steps was shocking, and I thought, 'No wonder we feel behind.'

As Smith and Aldam had hoped, Myers' research helped newsroom leaders narrow their search for a new CMS by indicating the biggest bottlenecks in the newsroom process flow, and spotlighting which changes likely would yield the greatest benefits. The features section, for example, proved to be one of the most complex departments. Its production processes involved an average 164 steps, most of them manual, to produce a finished story. Part of the problem was that artwork and story copy passed through separate, cumbersome editing processes. Editors manually made changes and passed the marked----up page on to the next person. The features department looked like "a rope with many different twines," Smith said. He felt that department would be a good candidate for reform.

What''s the Blueprint?

The newspaper clearly needed to reduce the steps required for a story to appear in print or online. But the maps were only a snapshot. If the *Times Union* were an ailing patient, the maps identified symptoms. A doctor would need to diagnose and suggest a cure for the underlying illness. That meant recommendations based on the revelations of the map, and an implementation plan.

Smith and Aldam decided that the newspaper should doctor itself. Rather than ask Myers to provide recommendations in her capacity as an independent expert, they decided to ask *Times Union* staff to lead the effort. Myers would act as advisor.[14] This combination, they hoped, would take advantage of Myers' outside perspective but avoid the perception that changes were imposed on the newsroom by an outsider. An internally generated mandate, Smith believed, would better inspire the reporters and other employees to contribute to the effort. Together, Myers and an insider team could produce a plan for the paper's immediate future which with luck would be both visionary and practicable.

Smith asked Mary Fran Gleason, a *Times Union* managing editor since 2000, to be project manager. A key player was Associate Editor Mike Spain, who had been the project leader when the old pagination system was installed in 1991 and had extensive experience and knowledge of newsroom technology. Gleason in turn assembled a team of seven project leaders, including Spain, to develop a program charter and identify the critical aspects of the initiative that would transform the newsroom. Other team members included senior newsroom staff and the paper's director of online coverage.

Gleason had already seen Myers' maps in draft form in late 2006. "Oh, it hurt to look at them," recalls Gleason. "It just said everything is so laborious."[15] But the maps also suggested specific changes and directions the paper could consider. It was Gleason and her team's job to decide which changes would transform the newspaper into a competitive and effective presence online while retaining the standards for quality the paper had established for its print product.

Gleason and her team decided to reduce the number of newsroom steps by at least half—a goal they considered ambitious but necessary. This meant the newsroom had to optimize staff resources and eliminate process bottlenecks. News had to get on the Web quickly, and it needed to be accurate. But stories also had to be smarter. The *Times Union* needed an organizational structure that freed up time so reporters could focus on writing stories that gave the paper's audiences more than they could get elsewhere. Stories that provided context, local flavor and interpretation—plus a vivid multimedia presentation for the online version—would hopefully reward loyal readers and attract new ones. Increased readership would bring back advertisers, creating a virtuous circle. Reducing the number of editorial steps would also, Gleason's team hoped, give reporters and editors

[14] "It was very much, at the end of the day, their processes," Myers says. "I really ended up being the facilitator and the provocateur." Source: Author's telephone interview with Myers, April 26, 2007.

[15] Author's interviews with Mary Fran Gleason, April 6 and 19, 2007, in Albany New York, and phone interview June 20, 2007. All further quotes from Gleason, unless otherwise attributed, are from these interviews.

the time to learn new skills. Gleason and Smith agreed to keep the team's specific plans confidential for the time being while they fielded proposals from potential CMS vendors and the team refined its vision. "People get all excited about something that's not really a given yet," Gleason says. The staff was told in general terms that change was afoot, and they were aware that a new CMS was coming, but specifics about possible job changes and larger newsroom transformations were kept largely under wraps. "We wanted to keep the staff informed ... but we also didn't want it to be disruptive to the day----to----day work," she adds.

The Prometheus Priorities

Over the course of several weeks, Myers and Gleason identified four broad areas to tackle. These were technology, training, staff reassignments and physical environment. Each had its own subset of challenges.

- *Technology.* The process map had abundantly confirmed that the CMS needed replacement. The pagination system would also have to be updated so that Mac and PC computers, old and new, could exchange information. Gleason and Spain also began to think about what equipment—personal digital assistants, digital cameras, video recorders, laptops, camera----adapted cell phones—the paper should buy to accommodate new ways of gathering and sharing information.

  Smith and Gleason discussed purchasing options: buy now, or wait even longer? Smith had been burned once already by too----hasty purchases. "When we first bought digital cameras they were $17,000 each, and now they're worthless, those old cameras," Smith says. "From that point of view it makes sense to not necessarily be the early adopter of some of this technology, to wait a little bit and see what happens."

- *Training.* Reporters in the Times Union's envisioned 24/7 newsroom might be asked to provide photographs or video as part of their reporting. Similarly, photographers might be asked to do light reporting. Training was necessary, but it wasn't clear how many people should be trained, to what extent, or at what cost. Smith actually interviewed and considered hiring a training consultant, who proposed an in----depth, four----day, off----site training for 20 reporters to learn video shooting, editing and website design. But Smith worried about the high cost of the course and taking so many people out of the newsroom for that length of time. "I don't know that diverting my star investigative reporter was quite the right approach," Smith says.

Also on the team's mind was how the anticipated job changes would affect the Times Union's 70----year relationship with its labor union. The Albany Newspaper Guild represented over 300 Times Union employees and had traditionally been a cooperative partner in labor negotiations. But with jobs and roles poised to change dramatically, Smith was uncertain how the Guild would react.

- *Staff reassignments*. In addition to technical training, newsroom staff would have to be retrained for new roles and responsibilities. For example, copy editors might be expected to oversee postings to the Web. Photo editors might incorporate video and write short copy about images. To succeed, the Times Union newsroom leaders would need to enlist staff support. "We were building this cultural transformation, changing the newsroom," Smith says. "People needed to understand that we are not just a newspaper anymore, and that was going to take some time."
- *Physical environment.* The newsroom would have to change physically to be more conducive to team collaboration. Smith and Gleason wondered how to integrate the online group, clustered in one part of the room, more fully with the rest of the newsroom to help rapidly transfer words, graphics and photos to the Web. The executive team also considered how to move artists and photographers from other areas of the building closer to the newsroom. Finally, even the furniture hampered the flexibility the newsroom needed. Some desks were bolted to the floor. Modular furniture and movable partitions would allow for easy redesign if, for example, the newspaper wanted in the future to create a new department.

After Myers and Gleason identified the broad categories ripe for change, the next step was to develop a roadmap to execute the plan. Myers' maps were posted in an empty conference space that would serve as the "war room" for the project, enabling the team to test CMS products on computers set up in the room and, as Gleason jokes, "throw paper at the walls and scream." The effort needed a name, so Gleason and her group brainstormed ideas, looking for a moniker that represented "a repositioning of the challenges ahead, preparation for the future, ready for the new world." Some suggestions: News Now!, Your Next *Times Union*, R/Evolution, Go Digital and dozens more. In the end, the team decided to name the project Prometheus. According to Greek mythology, Prometheus was a visionary concerned about the future. Gleason decided to keep the name under wraps until it could be announced at a newsroom kickoff event.

Mission and charter. Gleason developed a mission statement for Prometheus: "To transform the *Times Union* newsroom into a nimble, efficient and responsive operation that embraces and employs multimedia newsgathering techniques in order to meet the demand for customized news and information 24 hours a day, seven days a week, on

multiple platforms." The team also created a charter to describe the broad scope of the project, lay out goals and objectives, assess risks, and begin to determine requirements. The charter put everyone on the same page in terms of expectations. "The charter was a covenant or an agreement in concept," Gleason says. "The reason this is so important is that you never want to be in the middle of the project and go, 'Wait a minute, we never said we were going to do that, don't you think the project should be looking at X?'"

At times, Gleason felt overwhelmed. "I sat through all these meetings and realized that we were talking about not just a technology change but a profound change in the way we think," Gleason says. "It did start to feel overwhelming." Like Smith, Gleason felt that radical change was contrary to the industry's conventional way of thinking. "Newspapers are a traditional industry that comes with all the trappings of a big and lumbering giant that just doesn't know how to turn itself quickly," Gleason says. "Like somebody said to me, you need to learn how to be a speedboat and not a cruise liner."

Part of the difficulty was that the team had to find time to plan and execute Prometheus while still putting out a paper every day. Smith recalls: "The transition was time----consuming and expensive... There was a cost involved in taking Mary Fran [Gleason] away from the daily product, and all these project leaders who were working with her had real day jobs... They were putting out the paper."

Timing was also a subject of discussion. Gleason looked at the project as a three---- to five---year undertaking, but Smith wondered if that was realistic, and offered instead a combination of short----term and stretch goals. "I just couldn't quite imagine setting out on a three----year plan in a newsroom where we produced stuff for a daily paper," he says. "It seemed to me that the most we could say was, 'This is an 18----month transition period.'" In an update to the team, Gleason wrote that "if the program proceeds too slowly, we'll lose competitive edge in the marketplace." The choice between acting boldly and waiting to develop a more strategic approach weighed heavily on Smith. It was difficult to decide which category of change to tackle first.

By mid----2007, Smith, Aldam and the team knew they had to start taking action, not just plan. Smith says he did not intend to be groundbreaking—"it's smart to let somebody else make the mistakes"—but that time had run out and changes needed to be made. "It seemed to me that if we left the transition of our newsroom to the same time scale that our audience was migrating there, that we would lose that audience by not being there ahead of them," Smith says. "We needed to embrace it right away."

The team sat down with Myers' findings, Gleason's charter, and their own ideas for the next move. No newspaper had attempted to map and overhaul a newsroom in the way the *Times Union* was contemplating. The team would have to trust to its own best judgment to decide which area to address first, and how to present the proposed changes to the newspaper's employees.