

PRINTCASTING

New project boosts niche publishing prospects



How would you like a means of exploring ultra local news and (very) niche publishing markets without having to invest significant time, resources, or money? What if you could then automate that process so that generating copy, aggregating content, publishing, and distribution all simply took care of themselves? If advertisers could be left to place their own ads and the content providers got an equitable share of the profits? All automatically. And what if the end result was either online or hard copy just as the target market wants? That's the premise of Printcasting, a technology aimed at bridging the online/offline divide, exploring new publishing sectors, and turning an honest buck in the process.

Printcasting is a means of producing short run, niche newsletters by combining the wealth of user-generated content with existing online tools. The content is user generated but used by permission, the production is fully automated, and the distribution can either be online or printed with a frequency and print run chosen by the newspaper. The real beauty of it is that it creates a bridge between online and offline content, allowing local newspapers to explore ever more micro markets with very little outlay. Plus it comes complete with an advertising/profit sharing model that promises to keep everybody involved happy.

How does it do that?

It does that by combining the wealth of UG content (and particularly blogs) with the regular automated delivery of RSS so that the content is automatically delivered to a template alongside images, layouts, adverts, and text from the newspaper itself. These templates are

in a ready-for-print format so that the resulting newsletter is suitable for both online and offline distribution. Rather than reinvent the wheel, the creator of Printcasting – Dan Pacheco of Bakersfield, California – is using standard RSS feeds from news sources and blogs to provide the content flow into a drag and drop template (of his own design). All publishers have to do is invent a niche newsletter, select likely feeds, drag and drop the chosen content into a template, and then select the frequency of publication. If they wish, the process can be automated and self-updating from then on or it can be more carefully edited and controlled with set dates/times for new issues.

What's so special about it?

Printcasting aims to capitalise on the ultra-local news and views of UGC blogs, but in a way that is inclusive of those who wouldn't necessarily know what a blog was. The idea came from observing that advertisers in Bakersfield were hesitant about placing adverts online around the content of a successful local social networking site (Bakotopia) but rushed to advertise in a spin-off magazine based on the same content. By creating a print product from blogs it becomes possible to bridge online and offline worlds with a uniquely local focus. Pacheco likes to give the example of an ultra local bike magazine with content pulled from online comment combined with information such as local events calendars. The result is then published online but also printed and distributed in bike shops to reach both off and online audiences. Given that some target markets, notably senior citizens, are not so much divided between on and offline as polarised between the

two this makes sense; the blog-happy silver surfers would then find themselves being read in coffee shops by those who prefer to linger leisurely over their media.

The trick for publishers would be to select a target readership and ensure that relevant content is directed to them by whichever delivery media suits them best. Which surely plays to the strength of any magazine or newsletter publisher. At the same time, the ad sales story is relatively clear and compelling since the advertisers can create their own template-based adverts online. They then pay for them on the basis of the number of times they are downloaded or the print run of the resulting newsletter. With very small numbers of newsletters being viable, it becomes possible to chase down very niche markets indeed, or base publishing purely around special events or diary dates. Advertisers can also opt to select for themselves which Printcasts they wish to appear in or trust to the newspaper's advertising department to select for them based on its superior knowledge of the distribution, demographics, and disposable income represented by each Printcast.

As for the issue of UGC, it capitalises on it but also rewards the content generators. Experience suggests that most bloggers would be more than happy to see their content in print, not least since they then get a fair cut of the proceeds.

What are the obstacles?

There is nothing technologically revolutionary about Printcasting, so for once we're not really waiting to see if it works from that standpoint. RSS is a proven delivery channel for content to aggrega-

Printcasting project

Printcasting is being developed by Dan Pacheco and The Bakersfield Californian with the benefit of a US\$ 837,000 grant from the Knight Foundation with a view to combining content from blogs and the newspaper websites. The end result is to be a series of PDF newsletters to be either read online or printed in local copy shops or at home. Initially the subjects and sources of those newsletters is to be selected by the host newspaper but there is the possibility that the model could expand to allow tailor made personal publications to be chosen by users and then generated automatically.

The newsletters include an online advert placement service to facilitate niche advertising and a revenue model to reward bloggers for their contributions. The publication model is based on podcasting which features automated "publishing" of content at intervals set by the publisher. A "bridge" media between online and offline readership the Printcasts are intended to serve both as self-funding publications but also as a low risk, low cost means for publishers to explore the viability of hitherto untapped niche markets and ultra local publications.

A two-year project, the end goal is to make Printcasting available to anyone who wants to use it. The publishing medium itself is the familiar PDF and the software behind the scenes that extracts and amalgamates content from blogs and editorial is open source. Dan Pacheco, the father of Printcasting has explained that the whole system is intended to be readily integrated into existing workflow and publishing systems. Currently in the first stage, beta testing, the system goes onto live test next year at the Californian, moving later to a third stage in which the test is expanded to five selected publications.



Kiruba Shankar, CEO of Business Blogging, a social media consultancy, and founder-director of F5ive Technologies:

"Printcasting will be to publications what blogs are to journalism. Printcasting can fill in a definite need for people wanting to create niche publications. For example, I know a community in Chennai, India, that is very passionate about Ultimate Frisbee. Similar such small communities that love the sport exist in Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Delhi and Kodaikanal. Put together, the number of people across India can be a decent number. But not big enough for any publisher to bring out a magazine. That's where printcasting has a solution. Because of its low cost ... it is a viable option for this fledgling sport."

Open source and open to partnering



Dan Pacheco

IFRA: Can newspapers adopt the printcasting model in any way for use in the community?

Pacheco: Yes, and in several ways. As a recipient of the Knight Foundation's News Challenge, we are required to open source all of the printcasting technology by the end of the two-year project (by May 2010). But we may make some components available before then. We're building printcasting on the already open-source Drupal framework in the hopes that the large and growing Drupal community adopts it and keeps it going past the grant phase. Also, part of our grant is to extend printcasting to five other markets with partners who want to sponsor it – which could mean newspapers, or any company that sees the value printcasting will have for local news and information. We will begin to look for partners next spring, and begin working with them in December of 2009. This is not just an empty promise, as a significant portion of our grant from the Knight Foundation is tied directly to this objective. Our partners do not need to be in the United States. We hope to have at least one international partner, if not more. Finally, once printcasting code and documentation is open-sourced, we hope that a large, committed open source community is already in place to support it and keep it going. We hope that more than one newspaper gets involved in that way.

tors, template-driven publishing is a familiar approach, and even the automated delivery system is modelled on the existing format of podcasting (hence the Printcast name). Before hailing Printcasting as the answer to the on/offline divide, not to mention a neat means of profiting from UGC, there are a number of local market factors to be considered, however.

The model is based on the idea that there is not only a supply of ultra-local content being generated online, but that it is relatively regular and consistently appropriate to any given target market. Blogs on the other hand have a habit of wandering onto other subjects, becoming personal/offensive, and even drying up altogether. This means that even if a publisher is confident of the ability to aggregate into a sufficiently riveting read for their target market the result is unlikely to be a seamlessly automated process; a fair amount of editorial oversight will still be required.

Dividing the spoils is an excellent and equitable approach but the experience of existing online communities where contributors are rewarded has shown that it is a matter of time before "star bloggers" arise and demand recognition. That can help increase the standard of editorial, or it can spark jealousy and dissent. Admittedly this is a luxury problem for publishers, most of whom would be happy to have content generators competing for attention, but it is an issue that has proved troublesome even for well-established online forums such as Digg.

What next?

Printcasting certainly merits keeping an eye on, even with the proviso that it may not suit all markets equally. Currently being developed, the real test comes next year from March to November 2009 when the model is trialled in Bakersfield. Right now you can find out more at www.printcasting.com and IFRA will be monitoring developments closely. Who knows, you might find yourself reading future Flashlights in the Printcasting format of your choice.

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Print to online not a one-way street

When the World Wide Web was being created, publishers and journalists began to wonder how they could manage in future to convey their contents – both editorial and advertising – with the aid of the new medium to the customers. In some of the resulting discussions the question of the yield model fell by the wayside. Everything seemed to be settled if only the transformation from print to web could be managed to the advantage of the publishing houses. There were even some who saw it as the duty of the publishing houses and future media operations to prepare themselves for exclusively digital publishing and the abandonment of the print product.

Today, the situation is regarded in a somewhat more sober light. Modern publishing and media companies are diversifying their offerings for different target audiences and media, although print, online and mobile media draw their material from the same “newsdesk”-controlled newsroom.

All industries, from restaurant chains to Internet shops and printing plants, now avail of the possibilities offered by the Internet. In the mid-1990s, under the motto “Web to Print” a digital printing service developed for the first time. Wikipedia describes Web-to-Print as a term used to mean a template produced online. Other terms to describe the same process are: Online Publishing, Webtop Publishing, Automatic Documents, Print Factory and Dynamic Documents.

In this process, the contact between the client and the printer is through Internet pages that allow the client to simply specify the desired product and even produce the digital template. Delivery conditions, prices and deadlines are calculated immediately and online. The order is then placed digitally, confirmed, and the print products delivered several days later.

Publishing magazines and community newspapers could work in much the



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same way. The word “Printcasting” has been coined to describe this. But added to this here is the social function of Web 2.0. Content is generated via so-called “community” websites that interested laypersons can then publish in community publications without any need of techni-

Printcasting is just one development in a wide field of new forms of communities. It seems as if people are beginning to use the Internet to optimise their lives together and their interaction in natural interest groups. Such important developments in society have always influenced the development of newspapers.

cal skills, such as knowledge of layout design, make-up, typography, printing and finishing, as well as without high capital costs.

But printcasting is not just a term, it also an actual project under development in Bakersfield, California. The final result should be the creation of a web environment to enable all interested persons to produce a local publication, using existing

news sources such as, for example, blogs, and to add suitable advertising contents. Various techniques that exist already today should be combined for this purpose, e.g. RSS, automatic PDF production and automatic make-up by means of PDF templates as well as podcasting distribution technology (thus the term “Printcasting”). Distribution can be initially in digital form. Interested readers can subscribe online to the Printcast. Additionally, printing and distribution of the print product can be realised in cooperation with the local newspaper.

Profits should be generated by local advertising that is of interest because advertisers can be offered the possibility to reach a highly target audience-oriented market. Especially small and local businesses seek focused access to their specific customers. For example, a publication that focuses on the topic of “Fishing in the water-meadows of the Rhine near Ingelheim” could be of interest to all businesses that have something to offer fishermen in that region. These would not only be the owners of local shops specialising in selling sports and fishing gear, but also boat-hiring businesses and suppliers of camping equipment as well as transport and tourism organisations.

Reliably reaching desired target groups determines the success of local advertising. Local target audience publications can play an important role here. Publishing houses should use these new community media to their own benefit.

Printcasting is just one development in a wide field of new forms of communities. It seems as if people are beginning to use the Internet to optimise their lives together and their interaction in natural interest groups. Such important developments in society have always influenced the development of newspapers. It is no different this time.

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