

“Ink Stains Are *So* 20th Century:” The Resocialization of Student Journalists
at Online-Only College Publications

By Daniel Reimold, M.J.

Title: Scripps Howard Teaching Fellow & Mass Communication Ph.D. Candidate

Affiliation: E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, Ohio University

E-mail: dr716305@ohio.edu

“Ink Stains Are *So* 20th Century.” The Resocialization of Student Journalists at Online-Only College Publications

Linda Stricker likes to play editor under her bed. As the entertainment editor for *Speakeasy Magazine*, an online-only news outlet produced by students at Ohio University, the freshman journalism major prefers proofing and polishing writers’ pieces, answering e-mail queries from staffers, and completing her portion of the webzine’s weekly story budget from her cluttered, distraction-heavy dorm. Specifically, she completes her *Speakeasy* editorial work at different parts of each day, weekends included, tied to her computer in her honors dormitory room, at a messy desk situated beneath her raised loft-like twin bed.¹

Stricker, in many ways, embodies the new practical reality and larger idealistic spirit enmeshed within a majority of student online news outlets currently leaving their mark on campuses nationwide and into Canada. While completing work in dorm rooms instead of newsrooms and carrying out tasks at random free moments instead of during regular shifts, with e-mails and instant messages supplanting interpersonal staff communication and the chain of command being tossed in favor of freshmen and seniors working side-by-side, undergraduate staffers at the growing number of student-run online newspapers and magazines are changing the traditional image and very definition of what it means to be a student journalist and revolutionizing how news at colleges and universities is provided and produced.

The Internet in general has become the principal medium for news intake by nearly a quarter of all Americans, a 2004 Pew study found, with individuals citing the convenience, interactivity, and normally free price tag as the main factors leading to their

preference for online news.² As the popularity of Internet news escalates, affirmed most recently by a May 2006 Newspaper Association of America study finding an eight percent increase in online news readership during the past quarter, a majority of professional news organizations are turning to the online medium to provide information and turn a profit, with online advertising expected to reach its tipping point in the summer of 2006.³ Young adults, specifically those in their late teens and early twenties, represent the core audience of those “turning away from the news media [of] their parents and grandparents,” according to Newsday staff writer James Madore, instead referring to the Internet as their main, and at times only, news source.⁴

Along with the undeniable influence of the Internet in the dispersion and absorption of news within the public at-large, researcher Jane Singer found the online medium was also the main stimulus for a resocialization of sorts occurring among contemporary news staffers.⁵ In an extended study of four professional converged newsrooms, Singer discovered that reporters and editors were updating their notions of what it meant to be a journalist, seeing the online arm of their print publications enabling a more timely, “360-degree” scope on important news and forcing them to be better skilled at a variety of storytelling techniques and to embrace and utilize media once cast off as competition.⁶

Singer’s online-centric study bridged a new medium in the long line of mass communications research focused on the production end of the news creation and presentation process, specifically outlets’ organizational cultures, or the symbolic set of meanings working to create a reality shaped by members that both extends and constrains future action, as a valuable means of better understanding the way news stories are

selected and defined, how deadlines are set, and when a reporter is doing “good” work.⁷ The news media have long been found to operate within a specific culture or under a rather set paradigm, via a series of learned behaviors that tend to basically be absorbed (usually in an unspoken sense) by staffers from day one on the job, partly as the profession’s means for making sure standards are in place to deal with often ambiguous situations which arise from reporting on the complex outside world.⁸

In this sense, social scientists have declared that journalists inherently “make” or “construct” the news which the public eventually sees, a consequence of journalists’ inherent reliance on routines to more efficiently identify and break down information into manageable chunks that can be gleaned, glistened, and then presented on the air, in print or online.⁹ From a content perspective, for example, the stories which make it into a newspaper or nightly news report, according to researchers Gaye Tuchman and Mark Fishman, aren’t chosen or fashioned around the actual reality they represent but by how the reality plays out or fits into the professional norms, organizational structures, and deadline constraints of news media outlets’ information gathering, production, and presentation divisions.¹⁰

In an effort to extend these past landmark studies and Singer’s more recent contribution on the changing archetypes of converged professional newsrooms, and to better determine the exact nature and extent of new Internet-influenced journalism norms both at the student-level (prior to the potential manipulative effect of what Singer terms “newsroom socialization”) and with online-only publications (as opposed to the print-adapted sites at the center of Singer’s past analyses), a four-month ethnographic case study was carried out on Speakeasy Magazine (www.speakeasymag.com).¹¹ The

webzine, updated daily and focused on campus arts, culture, and sports at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, debuted in April 2005 as an independent offshoot of the school’s Online Journalism Students Society. It features a staff of roughly 70 undergraduates, a mix of writers, editors, photographers, and multimedia, public relations and advertising personnel mostly enrolled within the university’s E.W. Scripps School of Journalism as journalism majors in the online, magazine or public relations sequences.

Between January and April of 2006, a qualitative analysis of the Speakeasy staff culture was conducted through attendance of weekly editors’ meetings, bi-weekly all-staff meetings, a half-dozen editing and reporting workshops, a pair of all-staff pizza socials, and new staff interviews. Additionally, a private blog kept by the founding editors during the timeframe immediately prior to the site’s creation was perused and open-ended interviews were conducted with 21 former and current student staffers, including the three founding editors, all members of the current eight-person editorial board, three copy editors (including both copy chiefs), four staff writers (including two senior writers), and the publication’s publicity chair and two directors of advertising.

To buttress this intensive study of a single representative student-run online news outlet, open-ended phone interviews were carried out with 23 current staff writers and editors at 10 additional online newspapers and magazines created and updated by undergraduates at schools large and small, private and public, throughout the U.S. and one in Canada. The sites run by the interviewees are updated either daily, thrice-weekly, weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly and host written, audio, and video content running the gamut from news and opinion to light entertainment, creative writing submissions, and blog-style commentaries. Specifically, interviewed student staffers hailed from the

following publications: The DoG Street Journal (www.dogstreetjournal.com) at The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va.; Rampway Online (www.rampway.org) at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Ga.; Unbound (www.tcnj.edu/~unbound) at The College of New Jersey in Ewing, N.J.; SpartanEdge (www.spartanedge.com) and The Big Green (www.thebiggreen.net) at Michigan State University in Lansing, Mich.; CentralMania (www.centralmania.com) at Central College in Pella, Iowa; Bengal News (www.buffalostate.edu/bengalnews) at Buffalo State College in Buffalo, N.Y.; NovaNewsNet (<http://novanewsnet.ukings.ns.ca>) at the University of King’s College in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada; The Daily Gazette (www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/org/daily) at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pa.; and DawgNet (<http://dawgnetnews.com>) at Butler University in Indianapolis, Ind.

It was discovered that within a majority of these new journalism ventures the students are literally turning the traditional news-production paradigm on its head: undercutting the hierarchal staff structure present at most established student-news outlets (with top editors and new writers working as equals, most staffers taking on multiple responsibilities and the wall between news-editorial and PR/advertising completely broken down), changing the long-established journalistic work routines and communication patterns especially in respect to time and place (with e-mail employed as the main method of conversation and newsrooms scrapped in favor of staffers working individually from dorms at whatever time might be convenient), and striving to achieve much different overall content goals (such as setting up publications as dialogues with readers, not monologues, and attempting to serve up alternative content with an edgier, more personal voice than the traditional campus print newspaper).

The Experience Factor

For the student staffers who tell it now, the start of Speakeasy was the stuff of Hollywood legend. In October 2004, at the annual Online News Association conference, held that year in California’s movie capital, a group of Ohio University students formed the basis of the idea that would be Speakeasy Magazine, ironically mostly as a measure of disgust at similar proposals being thrown out during a mixed session of students and professionals.¹² As co-founder and former Executive Editor Katie Schmitt recalled:

There was a competition where they mixed random people throughout the whole conference— one student in each group with the professionals. The competition was to come up with a Web site for a college town. So all these people, from the president of MSNBC to the heads of ESPN.com, were pitching ideas and they were all horrible. Cara [McCoy, fellow Speakeasy creator] and I thought the whole thing was ridiculous. We knew we would do a much better job of creating a site for students. So we sat there and brainstormed while the conference was going on. We came back to Athens and thought, “We are so doing this.”¹³

As an alternative to the more established news outlets on campus, including the daily student newspaper *The Post* and the television station WOUB, the first cultural reorganization carried out during Speakeasy’s start-up in a journalistic sense was the elimination of the learning curve. Instead of requiring new staffers to start at an assistant or general-assignments level, as is the norm at most traditional student news outlets, Speakeasy offered students the opportunity to obtain substantial amounts of true, hands-on experience from the get-go, with nary a prerequisite and literally to anyone who raised her hand. “You have to understand, we didn’t have any freaking clue what we wanted to do when we started,” said co-founder and former Executive Managing Editor Cara McCoy, currently a web content editor for *NaplesDailyNews.com*. “It was cool because

we kind of had this general swooping idea, a big idea, a master plan of sorts, but we needed other people to step up and sort it out, tie up loose ends, and make it a reality.”¹⁴

The higher-than-expected turn-out and unexpected intensity of participation at the early meetings has prompted the top editors to continue touting the immediate-experience factor as a means to lure new staffers. “We just thought The Post was so exclusive,” said Schmitt. “You have to put in so much time and effort and work your way through this system of moving up and a lot of times I hear from people who feel like they don’t get anything out of it at all. Our take on things is a reversal. We basically say whoever shows up to our meetings is on staff, so we aren’t very exclusive at all. It’s something anyone can do. It’s basically, ‘Come get experience.’ That is our main selling point.”¹⁵

In part, the feeling of gaining nearly instantaneous, in-depth experience appears to stem from the level of ownership and investment that is built up within student staffers, making them work harder and delve in deeper because, as Stricker related, “we all feel a part of something.”¹⁶ “It made me excited to be sitting at the first few meetings and thinking ‘I can really get involved in this,’” said People & Places Editor Anna Marie Finley. “I felt like, ‘I can potentially really help create it and I don’t have to already be a senior and have five clips already.’”¹⁷ Staff writer April Prior recalled having a similar dichotomous reaction between her involvement in Speakeasy and the campus television station. “Like, at WOUB, I definitely feel like I know my place as a freshman,” she said. “I go in there and I’m a freshman who doesn’t know what I’m doing. With Speakeasy, I feel like everyone’s on the same level and everyone’s on the same page and I feel like I actually make a good contribution.”¹⁸

This staff-wide feeling of indispensability seems to be heightened, interestingly, by the newness and accompanying fragility of the entire enterprise. More specifically, staffers seem to be aware that they are more than mere cogs in a machine that has long produced content a certain way and will go to press daily, with or without them. Instead, almost across the board, writers and editors see their contributions as truly enabling content to be presented in a way it never has before and also having a tangible impact on the very survival of the site in the crowded university media marketplace. “Instead of me and Cara just being the figureheads, we’ve really said to the whole staff since the beginning, ‘This is in your hands,’” said current Co-Executive Managing Editor Caren Baginski. “Since we’ve put that sort of responsibility on them, they’re going to feel more ownership in what they do and whether or not we’re a success. Whenever I feel like I’m allowed an equal share in something, I’ll want to do it more than with something I’m just being talked at about or being told what to do.”¹⁹

Student staffers are also granted more freedom to shape their own experiences in respect to how they would like to be involved in the magazine, such as Wire & Blogs Editor Cydney Cappello being afforded the power to choose how best to integrate wire stories with locally-produced content on the site. “I’ve really enjoyed the freedom of working for an online publication,” Cappello said. “I’ve had an opportunity to form my own ideas, get feedback from readers, and make the wire stuff something all my own.”²⁰ Central College senior Erika Anthony assessed her experience as entertainment editor for the Iowa-based school’s webzine Central Mania as similarly, positively autonomous. “It’s a very individual endeavor,” said Anthony. “I don’t have anyone under me or anyone over me. I’m the only one responsible for the E-Mania page. I like it. I can do

what I want– use the colors I want, load the stories I want, and not the ones I don’t want. It’s basically total control, which is something not even my own boyfriend gives me.”²¹

The freedom aspect appears to come into play, at Speakeasy and other student online news outlets, most prominently in the story selection process, with a majority of writers brainstorming their own ideas and carving out their own niches in the beats or areas in which they most want to gain experience, whether it’s campus life, sports reporting or penning CD or movie reviews. “I like that I can choose what I want to write about as opposed to being told,” said SpartanEdge Love & Life Editor Diane Ivey. “My blog is very self-directed. I like the freedom it provides. There’s a lot more ‘You can say what you want’ and a lot less supervision, which I mean in a positive way. If you want editors’ help then they’ll give it to you, but it’s more like you have to seek it, as opposed to them giving input whether or not you wish to have it.”²² This freedom of pursuing the content with which each individual is most interested is also viewed as a positive for igniting a more lasting passion toward journalism in general. “I think writing what you want to write about is a huge part of journalism,” said Big Green staff writer Cara Binder. “It’s not leaving us to get assigned a story that we have no interest in, like covering a school board meeting or something else monotonous. It lets us continue to fan the flames of what excites the hell out of most of us looking to get into this line of work, which is finding out what we most want to know about and then sharing that with others.”²³

The main negative aspect of the freedom granted staffers to dive right in and create their own experiences is not that the opportunity for self-direction is present, but that many new staffers don’t have the knowledge or skills to know what direction they

want to take or the wherewithal to harness the new medium to accomplish their goals. As current Speakeasy Co-Executive Managing Editor Meghan Louttit shared:

It’s frustrating because I don’t feel like people are totally up on the notion that online is the future and you can do anything you want with it, so you can think out of the box. We keep stressing that we’re giving them all the freedom in the world to write what they want and a lot of leeway in how they write. You can have video, podcasts, slide shows or graphics. We’re really trying to impress that freedom on them. They definitely have a lot more control than at The Post. Most people don’t seem to understand that or don’t know how to fully embrace that or dive right in. Maybe more oversight is needed, in that sense. I don’t know.²⁴

Think Dialogue

Along with a heightened immediacy and redefinition of what it means to gain journalistic experience and how such experience is proffered and accrued, another main normative shift in the online student news media universe rests in the content aims of the staffers and sites. Specifically at Speakeasy, editors frequently remind writers that the news dug up and scrolled down should be “hyper-localized,” or completely campus-centric, with features and profiles specifically sought out on people, events, places, and organizations not covered by the traditional media.²⁵ “If people want news they watch CNN,” said Speakeasy staff writer Maria Fisher. “For culture and what’s going down on the OU campus, that’s when they turn to an online magazine.”²⁶ In part, the call for narrowly-located and alternative content is purely practical—enabling the outlet to fill a niche on campus by catering to students interested in what Speakeasy Copy Chief Jen Sickels called “the more underground, funky, real day-to-day social scene at school,” as opposed to the more official, hard-news focus of the campus newspaper.²⁷

In turn, this out-of-the-ordinary subject matter also helps to better define the publications as unconventional and lets potential readers be more aware of the specific

vibe and content they will face every time they visit the sites. In addition, with no real spatial or time constraints, writers are free to explore an array of more off-beat topics that a daily deadline or a story-length restriction might not permit, such as a long profile penned during winter quarter for *Speakeasy* on the student who serves as the school’s mascot at sporting events and a write-up last spring on Ohio University’s student-run Dance Dance Revolution Society.²⁸ “We wanted it to be different, off the beaten path, not so much underground but definitely alternative, catering to people who wouldn’t normally read *The Post*,” said co-founder Katie Gill. “There’s a lot of stuff the paper wasn’t covering and while it may not be crazy important to the campus at large, it’s still stuff some people would read about and care about but doesn’t get any attention.”²⁹ The decision to turn away from daily news coverage was also seen as a practical lifting of responsibilities, enabling the staff to focus their talents and energies full-force on the more unusual, cultural, and innovative pieces while leaving the straight information-gathering to those already doing it well. As Advertising Co-Director Ellen Cox shared:

I remember a blog posting about when Bong Hill [a popular social spot on campus] caught fire. While I was reading it, I kept thinking, “This is a news event, but we’re not covering it like one.” It was a firsthand account, with lots of opinions and more personal than a two-sided, you know, official-sourced news piece. It was a clear example that we are not and never want to be *The Post*. We don’t have the staff and capabilities and the newsroom and the means and the reputation to go out and cover news stories the way *The Post* does. We’re doing things our way and I think in time students will come to know that and appreciate it.³⁰

The overall emphasis on soft-news and the campus cultural scene is also seen as a means to better attract, and more personally connect with, readers. “It probably appeals to students because it’s not scary stuff, topic-wise either,” said *Speakeasy* Senior Writer Ryan Real. “It’s not, ‘Conflict in Pakistan.’ It’s a movie review.”³¹ The motivation

behind such a shift centers on the perception that at least a small slice of the student body is more interested in mundane, unofficial matters of college life than pressing matters of state. “Obviously, some outlets let us know what’s going on around the world and what’s terribly important,” said Speakeasy staff writer Christy Succop, “but sometimes as students we just want to know what’s going on this weekend.”³²

The culture feel and goals of the site appear to be directly coupled with a staff-wide passion to break out of the box of traditional news-writing style. In its wake, a more creative, edgy, and personal voice permeates the sites. Editors declare that while Associated Press style is still a guiding hand, other rules have been overridden, such as allowing obscenities, conjunctions, first and second-person voice, and abbreviations, and refusing to follow the strict inverted pyramid structures that have steered news stories in eras past. “As young adults, [the name Speakeasy] means freedom and the chance to speak your mind,” the Speakeasy site explains in the “Frequently Asked Questions” section. “Reminiscent of the speakeasies during Prohibition...it embodies a spirit of good times with good friends and being comfortable enough in your own skin to break the rules.”³³ In part, the traditional-rule-breaking is a means to better entice students to scroll to the ends of stories, especially given the difficulty of prolonged reading on a computer screen. “I definitely try to write more in Internet-style, to keep people’s attentions,” said Bengal News writer Brennan Cooper. “I try to give everything a unique voice. I use more italics and bolding and try to break it up so it’s not all just reading and scrolling like you’ll have in a newspaper. In online, you’ve got to be eye-catching to really attract and hold the interest of the viewer, so I’ll always try to break things up, even if it means using bullet points in the middle of a story or something else like that.”³⁴

This attention-grabbing aspect is also at the heart of the decision to infuse most stories on the outlets with the voices of the writers who pen them. The result, editors and writers agree: content with more feeling and individuality that soars above, what former Speakeasy entertainment editor Sara Goldenberg called, “that straight news style we’ve read thousands of times before.”³⁵ “I have one girl who can’t write anything but a humor column, so I created one for her, giving her an outlet to write,” said DoG Street Journal News Editor Jenn Sykes. “I had another who likes long flowing narratives for everything she does. I just try to let the writer’s voice shine through. If they’re going to take the time to write a story, I shouldn’t be telling them that there’s only one way to do it, because obviously as we’re learning more and more there’s not.”³⁶ The acceptance of individual voices also serves the larger purpose of attracting writers to take time out to contribute to begin with. “It allows them to write features that aren’t filled with just facts,” said Speakeasy’s Finley. “If we did change the way writers write, we would really turn people away. They might figure they might as well go work for The Post, if we’re doing the same things to their pieces. We want them to know that they can get something different here, that they can write with their own voice and get more leeway.”³⁷

Along with a greater level of creativity and personality, content on student-run online news outlets reflects an edgier, more in-your-face, non-conformist spirit, staffers agree. At Michigan State’s online student-run news outlet SpartanEdge, for example, editors famously, and infamously, decided earlier this year to run the controversial cartoons produced in the Netherlands depicting the Prophet Mohammad, prompting demonstrations across campus and a swarm of media attention. “We definitely got a lot of flak and notice from that, including a bunch of write-ups and coverage by local news

outlets,” said SpartanEdge Movies & Books Editor Courtney Bowerman. “Basically, after that incident, for better or worse, people knew we were there. Our decision to post them was also good because it kind of reflected who we are as a publication. We’re edgy. We’re up-to-date. We’re snarky.”³⁸ At Georgia State’s Rampway Online, editors recently published a much-talked-about list of “Things That Are Hot and Things That Are Fucking Lame.” “We’re never out to just make enemies, but we also definitely don’t really back down or bow down to anyone,” said Allison Young, Rampway’s director and editor in chief. “We’re very liberal and it shows in our writing and how we write and I think that’s why we come across as controversial. We’re just trying to serve the student body though, so we reflect them.”³⁹ Overall, through the edginess and individuality, the culture concentration and first-person focus, student staffers seem unified in their attempts to create content that embodies a new kind of mediated news outlet, which Stricker dubbed “a magapaper or a newszine.”⁴⁰

From a content perspective, the last extension of such a journalistic reinvention comes in the efforts of online student journalists to create not just a news or media outlet but a full-on social network. “Our philosophy in terms of how we view Speakeasy is that it should be a dialogue, not a monologue,” said co-founder Cara McCoy. “We want you [the reader] to have your voice...to become involved. And if that’s just reading the site, that’s OK. If it’s logging in and leaving comments on a couple stories, that’s even better. If it’s writing for us, that’s the best.”⁴¹ Student-run sites as a whole have implemented a host of high-tech accoutrements and low-tech sounding boards all aimed at creating a social center, a hub that their fellow students feel is a must to check out daily in order to feel connected to campus life. More specifically, a majority of sites offer readers the

opportunity to post their own photographs and blogs which can be searched and tagged by friends and turned into personally-designed e-mail-ready e-cards, along with real-time weather forecasts, frequently updated local restaurant menu listings, specials, and hours of operation, and streaming videos, podcasts and MP3 music files containing interviews or snippets of songs, movie previews, speeches or concert performances. “The goal is to make Speakeasy *the* site to log onto for OU students,” said Louttit. “We want students to make us their homepage. They can blog whatever they want, post photos, look at their friends’ photos from the weekend, and check out the news and what’s going on around campus and even see how they can get involved. It’s real-life culture, just online.”⁴²

Along with the technologically advanced features drawing students into the social fold, sites have been designed not just for the readers’ eyes, but interestingly also with their voice in mind. Specifically, comment boxes are provided at the close of most stories and reader remarks are visible right alongside or after writers’ pieces or viewable through one simple click of the mouse. As Baginski said:

We’re not just talking at readers. We really want them to respond and say if you were at the event that we’ve covered tell us if you had a good time. I don’t know if anyone can be a journalist, but it’s great for people to have a place where they feel they can leave their mark. There’s really no other outlet like it, except maybe a newspaper editorial page or letters to the editor in magazines, which are obviously edited and pre-screened and weeded out. We’re giving people the opportunity to post basically whatever comments they want on any article, if you have a concern or a question or just a passing remark. I think it really enriches the writers’ points-of-view and the stories as well.⁴³

On certain sites, writers’ AOL Instant Messaging screen names are provided, so readers can chat about the stories they’ve scrolled through or related topics in real time with the people who have created them. A host of reader-interactive contests and competitions are also initiated by student online news staffers, in which readers are

encouraged to contribute content that will be placed live onto the sites. Through these endeavors, the overall goal is to display a real-time synchronicity with the general student public, existing as outlets which not only favor reader interaction and input but literally are *run by them*. As Speakeasy managing editor Meghan Louttit shared:

At that 2004 conference in Hollywood, Joe Trippi (who ran Howard Dean’s failed 2004 presidential campaign which was famously online-centered) said the Internet is the last place for true democracy. That plays into our decision not to be thought of as a news organization. We want everyone to be on the same playing field, from the top editors to the writers to the readers. We’re a very liberal, outspoken campus, on all sides of all debates. With Speakeasy, we can get a sense from students as to what they really want to know about and immediately start pushing those issues and then let them come on and respond...and then we can know what they’re thinking and work from there. Besides letters to the editor and individual staff e-mails, print publications can’t know what readers are thinking of them, on that scale. At any time of day, students can come on and be a part of Speakeasy and through us get involved in campus and the community. They can be engaged in a real dialogue.⁴⁴

Anytime, Anyplace

While readers and creators are being meshed into one great, democratic, concordant mix, a similar synchronicity does not exist from a production perspective, especially in respect to time and place. Besides weekly or bi-weekly pre-arranged staff meetings, students reported that they followed no real set schedules or routines for upholding editorial responsibilities, such as the nightly shifts in the newsrooms still adhered to at most traditional campus newspapers, instead completing their work when the mood or inspiration struck them or in-between the myriad of other things popping up during their day. “I guess a typical week would be— well, I really don’t know,” said Speakeasy assistant entertainment editor Nicole Bonomini. “There really is no typical week. Every week is just so different. Schedule-wise, it changes, even from day to day

and article to article. I really fit that part of my life around when a person can meet with me and when I have time with classes and other stuff I have to get done.”⁴⁵ A majority of students said they worked on at least some tasks for their news outlets every day, whenever they came up, usually for no more than an hour or two if all the separate timeframes were to be totaled, including answering related e-mails as soon as they receive them, brainstorming story ideas while walking to class or in the shower, obtaining press passes, planning meetings, posting stories online, and looking over story budgets.

Staff work also appears to get completed at the spur of the moment, mostly in moments of downtime, such as the “post-dinner pre-homework lull” and late at night when dormitories and late-night television talk shows are abuzz and students’ creative instincts are in high gear.⁴⁶ “It is just nice that I can write or edit a story, find the picture for it, and send it all out in between the 50 million other things I’m doing,” said Finley. “Students are nocturnal. They do work when they can fit it in and nighttime seems to work best for us. And as long as we make our deadlines, of course, no one cares.”⁴⁷

Top editors at the outlets also are not concerned with *where* their fellow staffers complete their work, enabling many to choose the comfort of their own dorm or apartment or favorite spot in the school library or public computer lab. “I like working on stories wherever I want,” said Speakeasy staff writer Maria Fisher. “It would be a pain to know I’d have to get ready, get everything together and walk or drive to a place where I’ll have to suddenly be creative. Another nice thing of being at home is that you can work on a machine or with Internet that you’re familiar with and you don’t have to learn any new programs or equipment.”⁴⁸ While the non-site-specific nature of students’ work is in part due to a majority of the outlets’ lack of funds or administrative

approval to secure on-campus meeting places, staffers also see it as an affirmation of what their online journalistic endeavor is all about. “We had a newsroom last year in this soundproof room with space-age foam on the walls, but no one liked going there,” said Speakeasy news editor Jen Edse. “It felt very out of the way. I mean, why walk 20 minutes to a newsroom when you can just stay in your room and get the same things done right away? That’s what an Internet source is all about. If you have a laptop and wireless, you’re ready to work whenever and wherever you want. No more getting your hands dirty in some newsroom. Like our motto says, ‘Ink Stains are *So* 20th Century.’”⁴⁹

Students enjoy the freedom afforded each staff member to individually plan when and where they want to switch into, what Daily Gazette News Editor Lauren Stokes at Swarthmore dubbed, “my journalist mode versus my student or fun-party-girl mode,” hinting that such an accommodating journalistic work schedule may not just be a perk but a prerequisite for the ever-busier modern student lifestyle.⁵⁰ “Most of us work and go to school full time, so Rampway has a ton of flexibility,” said staff writer Chelsea Taylor. “Whenever you have time, you sit down and write. Then you click send and you’re finished. It’s simple and surprisingly efficient.”⁵¹ The positive aspect of such flexibility also extends to students’ desires to gain journalistic experience, while not allowing their news work to completely overtake their academic, extracurricular or social lives.

Most student staffers said they were involved in numerous school organizations and activities, outside jobs, and full class-loads, with Speakeasy advertising co-director Ellen Cox echoing the sentiments of many in sharing, “I love the experience I’m gaining and how I passionate I can be with it and still have the freedom of being able to do other stuff and not like make Speakeasy my life.”⁵² “I have a couple friends who work at the

school newspaper and they’re working more than 30 hours a week,” said Big Green staff writer Erin Robinson. “It’s like a full-time job. This is more of just gaining experience. For someone like me, who’s really busy and has an outside job, it’s just a lot better. I get my clips published that I need for internships and still have time to do other things.”⁵³

Apart from keeping staffers happy and motivated, this extra participation is also seen as a desirable asset for the online publications themselves. “What’s great about having students on staff who are so involved in campus life is that they offer great ideas based on things they’re involved in or people they know or things they hear and sometimes offer different takes or angles on stories just based on their knowledge of what’s going on at the school because they’re so much a part of it,” said Dawgnet Editor in Chief Sarah Hill.⁵⁴ The highly compliant work schedule also fits into what staffers say is the modern student’s concentration deficiency and multi-tasking mentality. “I hardly ever get a chance to focus on one thing,” said Speakeasy advertising co-director Michael Newman. “If I do, I get exhausted. So everything I do is more fluid. Like, when I’m in the moment, I’ll work on it. Overall, I’m all over the place. I will literally just go from one thing to the next to the next. It’s usually schoolwork first, exec responsibilities for advertising club second, Speakeasy third, and then exercise for fun and health fourth, and heck if I have time for a social life in there, I’ll fit that in too.”⁵⁵

The main negative aspect cited by many related to such a single-minded focus on being all over the place is a lack of consistency in students’ work for the sites, with staffers at times giving only half-hearted efforts or failing to undertake any related responsibilities at all. “The biggest issue seems to be just balancing everything, with schoolwork, other stuff and Speakeasy,” said Speakeasy News Editor Jen Edse. “Some

people don't seem to know how to do that. I can't do it sometimes still. I get e-mails from people telling me they honestly didn't have time to get a story done. I understand that people have other stuff to do. I would never tell them they should have been doing stories instead of studying for a test, for example. I just wish they'd feel like Speakeasy was more important and would *make* time to do it instead of just always realizing they don't have enough time to get it done.”⁵⁶ Additionally, the individual work ethic at times doesn't produce the distraction-free motivation necessary to buckle down and also think outside the box. “I definitely see that if you need a push, being in a newsroom or another common place where everyone is working will make you want to work too and provide an easy face-to-face sounding board for ideas or suggestions about the story you're working on,” said Unbound Health Editor Jenise Beaman.⁵⁷

Staff Interaction

In lieu of face-to-face interaction, the culture of communication propagated among online student news outlets is almost wholly electronic, with e-mail and instant messaging cited by all staffers interviewed and observed as the principal and oftentimes only means of inter-staff contact. “Basically, it's just e-mails,” said Speakeasy People & Places Editor Anna Marie Finley. “It's e-mailing, e-mailing, e-mailing. I spend hours upon hours sending e-mails for Speakeasy. Even as I'm talking now, I'm thinking about the next round of them that I have to send out.”⁵⁸ The reliance on e-mail is seen as aiding the time-and-place-centered flexibility, specifically in not forcing staffers to be in the same room or with the same moment free to take a phone call in order to communicate. “We definitely communicate almost all by e-mail,” said Big Green's Erin

Robinson. “I don’t even have phone numbers of people on the staff. I’m pretty compulsive with checking e-mail. I love it. If you’re comfortable with being online and are a quick typist, it’s really freeing, because you can shoot someone a quick e-mail from anywhere and they can shoot one back to you in the same way.”⁵⁹

The use of list-servs for mass e-mails and message boards on the back-end of sites for all staffers to leave comments and questions also allows for an openness which students said would not be possible within the traditional newsroom set-up. “We’re lucky because there are literally never decisions being made behind closed doors,” said Daily Gazette Sports Editor Andrew Quinton. “Everyone on the staff is always talking to everyone else. For example, all of the articles are sent to the entire staff through our list-serv when they’re done so anybody can look over them and make comments or edits. Most of the time people don’t make edits, but it’s nice to know that you can.”⁶⁰ Several staffers also praised the time-and-creativity-saving element of being able to dash off a message at the same workstation where they are writing or editing a story, enabling them to communicate quickly, efficiently, and without breaking their train of thought.

The shortcoming of such efficiency in communication creation on the sender side, staffers agree, is the often slow or nonexistent responses from the receiver. Editors in particular gripe that e-mails lessen levels of accountability among writers by enabling them to reply to requests for story coverage or changes in an article draft at their leisure or at times not at all. As Finley aptly put it, “E-mail is slow, OK? It doesn’t matter how often you’re checking it, which I do every hour. I get e-mails from writers all the time about things I asked them about two days ago. Some staff writers will step up and agree to cover stories and then not follow through and it’s so damn hard to track them down

and find out what’s going on, especially with the main correspondence being through e-mail. It’s maddening, almost enough to make me want to harass them by phone.”⁶¹

This accountability gap is most prevalent between members of different parts of the staff, specifically between section editors and the photography crew and writers and copy editors, since editorial oversight is not seen as direct and therefore e-mail messages are often ignored or placed low on the priority scale. “We’ve been having a lot of problems with photography,” said Stricker. “It’s tough first to just get them [the student photographers] to confirm they’re covering something, especially when the request comes from me and not the head photographers. Then it’s still out of my control because I never really know what’s going on picture-wise after the fact. They never get back in touch to confirm they’ve shot a scene and so I end up seeing the final product online just like everyone else, which is annoying.”⁶²

The e-mail-dependent nature of staff interaction also appears to be the root cause of the most shared and pronounced frustration among current staffers: the face-to-face disconnect. Specifically, most students jokingly shared during interviews that, while they constantly virtually communicate with their fellow staffers, they would not be able to pick a majority of them out of an in-person line-up. “I honestly don’t really know most of the writers’ faces,” said Dawgnet News Editor Mary Kvachko. “I know their name, their beat, their writing style, their e-mail address and IM name, things like that, but I wouldn’t know to say hi to them if I passed them on the street. People bonding and feeling like a part of a team is still a real issue. There’s just something really positive and productive that we’re missing, just having everyone in the same room at once, talking, seeing each other, and being on the same page with what’s going on.”⁶³

That positive missing *something*, staffers concur, is the greater level of impulsiveness and depth inherent in a real-time conversation. “I like the spontaneity aspect, like asking a question or making a comment based on something I just think of in the moment, which might be helpful but obviously doesn’t apply when just talking by e-mail,” said Speakeasy senior writer Ryan Real. “Also, I like that you can obviously talk at length more at the in-person meetings, at least for people who take advantage of that. My editor and I can make sure we’re on the same wavelength and she can ask a question and I can answer immediately, so it promotes more understanding.”⁶⁴

Multi-Tasking Mentality

A last normative reinvention playing out daily at the student-run news outlets under study is a staff-wide emphasis on editorial multi-tasking, meshing the traditional definition of what it means to be a writer and editor with the online necessity of 360-degree story packaging. Specifically, writers are encouraged to photograph events they cover, editors often write for their sections and keep blogs, and photographers also often double as multi-media personnel, capturing video and audio podcasts for placement online. “We wanted to be extremely open to people’s interests and extremely flexible to how they might change,” said McCoy. “We wanted to be able to highlight and showcase what people are already good at and also let them get their feet wet with something they want more experience in or have a passion for.”⁶⁵ Providing students with a wider variety of experiences and broadening the scope of what each position includes is also seen as a necessary part of the larger changing of the guard between old and new media. “Journalism is really starting to move away from specialized tasks and responsibilities to

staffers needing to be a jack-of-all-trades type employee, especially with online,” said Speakeasy co-founder Katie Gill. “It makes me feel better to know that through Speakeasy I’ve had my hands in areas that I haven’t even had classes about.”⁶⁶

The multitask approach has also broken down the once-sacred wall between the news-editorial and advertising-public relations divisions, with a majority of staffers engaging in activities in both spheres. Speakeasy writers and editors specifically engage in a variety of PR, networking, and advertising endeavors, such as chalking a campus sidewalk, posting and handing out flyers, speaking in classes, and manning tables at organization involvement fairs. “It’s more personal when we sell it to others, because we really work on it,” said Hana Bieliauskas, Speakeasy copy chief and writer. “We know more about it. We want to see it get a bigger name, obviously, because it directly affects us. I mean, I want people to read my stuff. I’m emotionally involved with the site and people can sense my attachment when I tell them about it. The PR-person only gets it secondhand, so it’s obviously not as personal or immediate in their minds.”⁶⁷

The journalism-PR interconnection for staffers is also seen as a positive in providing students not quite sure of their career path with a wider swath of potential experiences, which makes them stronger applicants for future internships and jobs and helps the outlets at the same time. As advertising co-director Cox said, in recounting the first pitch she made to a potential advertiser on the Speakeasy site, “I was able to walk in and tell them more about the magazine as a whole. You know, ‘Here’s our vision and overall goals and how we’re planning to get there.’ Since I do write articles, it was easy to talk about the editors and staff members and give them both sides of the story— the

editorial side with the advertising. It’s great that I’ve got experience now on both sides of the fence. It’s the best of both worlds.”⁶⁸

Conclusion

Overall, on a larger level than mere multitasking, e-mail messaging or content-switching, the most distinct manner in which students at online-only college publications have undergone a journalistically-revitalizing resocialization is simply their fondness for thinking outside the box and beyond the traditions of journalism’s past. “It’s sort of frustrating and exciting at the same time with being a start-up in a still-new medium, because we have to literally come up with solutions and ways of doing things as we go along,” said Gill. “We don’t have the problem of being an established outlet where it’s just been done one set way for so long that questioning it is seen as tantamount to starting a rebellion, so no one changes anything. At Speakeasy, we confer and figure out the best way to do something and because we aren’t in a set pattern, we can literally figure out the best way and not simply refer to the way it has been forever, good or not.”⁶⁹

The subsequent impact such outlets are making on campuses nationwide and beyond is a testament to their embracing of the new but also their ability to provide such innovation with a level of long-term permanence, always with their target audience in mind. “We’re trying to incorporate the new technology and the new way people communicate and learn about the world and come together,” said Rampway Director and Editor in Chief Allison Young. “That’s why college students are really responding to us. They’ve come to realize that we’re not going to go away anytime soon, just like the medium we inhabit. Seriously, the online news outlet is here to stay.”⁷⁰

Notes

¹ Interview, Linda Stricker, March 6, 2006.

² “Online news growing as a source,” <http://www.cyberjournalist.net/news/002766.php> (accessed on March 10, 2006).

³ See “Newspaper Web sites up, print circulation down,” <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/05/08/newspapers.circulation.ap/index.html> (accessed on May 8, 2006); and Anthony Moor, “Go to the Web, young journalist!,” <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/060316moor/index.cfm> (accessed on March 23, 2006).

⁴ Mark Glaser, “Youth of Today Reject Ink Stains for Net News; At-Home Work Counters At-Work Play?,” <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/glaser/1044559727.php> (accessed on March 10, 2006).

⁵ Jane Singer, “More Than Ink-Stained Wretches: The Resocialization of Print Journalists in Converged Newsrooms,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 81.4 (Winter 2006): 838-856.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Charles R. Bantz, “News Organizations: Conflict as a Cultural Norm,” in *Social Meanings of News: A Text Reader*, ed. Dan Berkowitz (Sage: Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1997).

⁸ Stephen D. Reese, “The News Paradigm and the Ideology of Objectivity: A Socialist at the Wall Street Journal,” in *Social Meanings of News: A Text Reader*, ed. Dan Berkowitz (Sage: Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1997).

⁹ See Michael Schudson, “The Sociology of News Production,” in *Social Meanings of News: A Text Reader*, ed. Dan Berkowitz (Sage: Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1997); and Dan Berkowitz, “Non-Routine News and Newswork: Exploring a What-a-Story,” in *Social Meanings of News: A Text Reader*, ed. Dan Berkowitz (Sage: Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1997).

¹⁰ Gaye Tuchman, “Making News By Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected,” in *Social Meanings of News: A Text Reader*, ed. Dan Berkowitz (Sage: Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1997).

¹¹ Singer, “More Than Ink-Stained Wretches,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*.

¹² See Interview, Meghan Louttit, March 4, 2006; Telephone Interview, March 7, 2006; and Interview, Caren Baginski, March 26, 2006.

- ¹³ Telephone interview, Katie Schmitt, March 7, 2006.
- ¹⁴ Telephone interview, Cara McCoy, April 3, 2006.
- ¹⁵ Telephone interview, Katie Schmitt, March 7, 2006.
- ¹⁶ Interview, Linda Stricker, March 6, 2006.
- ¹⁷ Interview, Anna Marie Finley, March 8, 2006.
- ¹⁸ Interview, April Prior, April 5, 2006.
- ¹⁹ Interview, Caren Baginski, March 26, 2006.
- ²⁰ Interview, Cydney Cappello, March 6, 2006.
- ²¹ Telephone interview, Erika Anthony, April 21, 2006.
- ²² Telephone interview, Diane Ivey, April 10, 2006.
- ²³ Telephone interview, Cara Binder, April 8, 2006.
- ²⁴ Interview, Meghan Louttit, March 4, 2006.
- ²⁵ Telephone interview, Cara McCoy, April 3, 2006.
- ²⁶ Interview, Maria Fisher, March 27, 2006.
- ²⁷ Interview, Jen Sickels, March 10, 2006.
- ²⁸ Telephone interview, Cara McCoy, April 3, 2006.
- ²⁹ Telephone interview, Katie Gill, March 25, 2006.
- ³⁰ Interview, Ellen Cox, March 26, 2006.
- ³¹ Interview, Ryan Real, March 27, 2006.
- ³² Interview, Christy Succop, March 27, 2006.
- ³³ “What’s with the name?,” <http://speakeasymag.com/index.php/about/category/faq/#name> (accessed March 10, 2006).
- ³⁴ Telephone interview, Brennan Cooper, April 7, 2006.
- ³⁵ Interview, Sara Goldenberg, March 7, 2006.

- ³⁶ Telephone interview, Jenn Sykes, April 10, 2006.
- ³⁷ Interview, Anna Marie Finley, March 8, 2006.
- ³⁸ Telephone interview, Courtney Bowerman, April 11, 2006.
- ³⁹ Telephone interview, Allison Young, April 9, 2006.
- ⁴⁰ Interview, Linda Stricker, March 6, 2006.
- ⁴¹ Telephone interview, Cara McCoy, April 3, 2006.
- ⁴² Interview, Meghan Louttit, March 4, 2006.
- ⁴³ Interview, Caren Baginski, March 26, 2006.
- ⁴⁴ Interview, Meghan Louttit, March 4, 2006.
- ⁴⁵ Interview, Nicole Bonomini, March 27, 2006.
- ⁴⁶ Interview, Michael Newman, March 25, 2006.
- ⁴⁷ Interview, Anna Marie Finley, March 8, 2006.
- ⁴⁸ Interview, Maria Fisher, March 27, 2006.
- ⁴⁹ Interview, Jen Edse, March 14, 2006.
- ⁵⁰ Internet interview, Lauren Stokes, April 9, 2006.
- ⁵¹ Internet interview, Chelsea Taylor, April 6, 2006.
- ⁵² Interview, Ellen Cox, March 26, 2006.
- ⁵³ Telephone interview, Erin Robinson, April 8, 2006.
- ⁵⁴ Telephone interview, Sarah Hill, April 11, 2006.
- ⁵⁵ Interview, Michael Newman, March 25, 2006.
- ⁵⁶ Interview, Jen Edse, March 14, 2006.
- ⁵⁷ Telephone interview, Jenise Beaman, April 7, 2006.
- ⁵⁸ Interview, Anna Marie Finley, March 8, 2006.

- ⁵⁹ Telephone interview, Erin Robinson, April 8, 2006.
- ⁶⁰ Telephone interview, Andrew Quinton, April 10, 2006.
- ⁶¹ Interview, Anna Marie Finley, March 8, 2006.
- ⁶² Interview, Linda Stricker, March 6, 2006.
- ⁶³ Telephone interview, Mary Kvachko, April 7, 2006.
- ⁶⁴ Interview, Ryan Real, March 27, 2006.
- ⁶⁵ Telephone interview, Cara McCoy, April 3, 2006.
- ⁶⁶ Telephone interview, Katie Gill, March 25, 2006.
- ⁶⁷ Interview, Hana Bieliauskas, March 10, 2006.
- ⁶⁸ Interview, Ellen Cox, March 26, 2006.
- ⁶⁹ Telephone interview, Katie Gill, March 25, 2006.
- ⁷⁰ Telephone interview, Allison Young, April 9, 2006.