

Look before you leap:

Simson L. Garfinkel

Many newspapers are feeling pressured to do something about the Internet — to get online and get with the new technology. But journalists, editors and even newspaper management face a dangerous reality in this online quest: they are frequently less informed about the new technology than the majority of their computer-using readers.

Over the past three years, I've dealt with dozens of editors and publications that hadn't mastered e-mail, web surfing or even plugging a modem into a computer. They hadn't mastered the new technology because they hadn't tried; they were simply too busy trying to get the paper or the magazine out to spend their time exploring.

Now that computers and the Internet are becoming ubiquitous, many newspapers are trying to play a fast catch-up, frequently with mixed results.

Like many businesses, newspapers are having trouble coming to terms with the new technology. Journalists can use e-mail to help report stories. Editors can use e-mail to solicit feedback from readers. Papers can supplement their printed pages with additional material that's available on the web. But each of these

It's easy to make a fool of yourself on the Internet

applications has its own pitfalls — ways in which the paper's credibility, reputation, and even labor relations can be damaged.

Look before you leap

It's easy for a single newspaper reporter to get e-mail through one of the nationwide online services like America Online or CompuServe. It's easy to set up a simple web site. And it's easy to look really bad in the process. Before your publication starts publishing e-mail addresses and addresses on the web (called URLs), all of the writers, editors and production personnel should have several months of hands-on experience with the new technology. This will prevent embarrassing snafus later on.

Establish a style

Once your writers are experienced at typing e-mail addresses and URLs into

their PCs, establish a style for the paper. Should addresses be printed in bold, italics, or courier? Should addresses like <http://sun.vineyard.net/simson/clipfile/96.Wired.StatusQuo.pp> be hyphenated, broken on the slashes, or simply printed in boxes alongside the story? Computer magazines have been dealing with this problem for years, and usually not very successfully. Some use italics, which can be hard to read. Others use fonts that don't distinguish between the lower-case letter "l" and the number "1," or between the capital letter "O" and the number "0." Readers will be annoyed if they type in long addresses printed in your publication, only to find that they don't work.

Establish an e-mail policy for employees

Most newspapers would never print the home phone numbers of their writers, but they seem to have no problem printing "home" e-mail addresses. If papers are going to print e-mail addresses for their writers, then those e-mail accounts should be paid for by the company, which should also establish a policy regarding appropriate and inappropriate use.

Establish an e-mail policy for reporting

Electronic mail messages are not phone calls and should not be treated as such. Your paper should establish policies as to whether e-mail conversations

between reporters and outsiders are by default on or off the record. Electronic mail is easy to forge; you should have a policy regarding the verification of names, titles, and the quotes, especially when dealing with controversial topics.

Don't take sides with services

When the first journalist at a paper gets his or her own online account, invariably there's the series of articles about what life is like online. Although this is an important topic, too often journalists take sides, extolling the virtues of one online service over another. This is a dangerous path to follow: it's a little like a journalist who lives in Brentwood explaining why nobody should live in South Central Los Angeles. Online services are electronic neighborhoods, and people using one will be rightfully offended by a journalist who says that they should move across town.

Don't plug your own lateness

Newspapers love to write articles and editorials about how they are "getting online." Recently, I've seen small papers plug e-mail letters-to-the-editor, nascent web pages, and a range of other introductory services. But while e-mail to the editor might have been radical in 1988, it's an old hat now. Instead of running that editorial, just put the e-mail address on the masthead and see if anybody uses it.▲

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SNPA papers compete in printing contest

The Gainesville (Ga.) Daily Times, the Charleston (W.Va.) Daily Mail and The Daily Oklahoman (Oklahoma City) won first place honors in their respective circulation categories in the 1996 SNPA Best Quality

(Texas) County Daily News, and third place was awarded to the Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette. Twenty newspapers competed in this category.

Fourteen newspapers entered the Print Quality Contest in the under