



**Online Journalists Optimistic About Revenue and Technology,  
Concerned About Changing Values**

Journalists who work online are more optimistic about the future of their profession than are news people tied to more traditional media platforms, but at best their optimism is an uneasy one, according to a new survey of members of the Online News Association produced by the Association and the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism.

These online news people also believe that the Internet is changing the fundamental values of journalism—and more often than not for the worse.

Overall, the online journalists surveyed are less likely to think journalism is headed in the “wrong direction” than are journalists from legacy media. They are also more confident than they are pessimistic that online news will find a self-sustaining revenue model.

Contrary to current economic trends in the news industry, most report staff increases and are seeing their sites turn a profit—though this is still heavily influenced by how costs are accounted for.

But these economic hopes, while encouraging, are still largely pinned on Web advertising, whose revenues in news began flattening out in 2008.

When it came to the impact of the Internet on values, the most cited change was a loosening of standards and more carelessness in online news gathering.

Those journalists surveyed, who come largely from websites linked to legacy media, also believe the Web is changing the fundamental values of the journalism—mostly for the worse. In particular, they are worried about declining accuracy, in part due to the emphasis online that news organizations are putting on speed and breaking news.

But not all of the changes were considered worrisome. Some journalists praised the growing diversity of voices, the potential of technology, and in some cases, even the move toward more overtly ideological points of view at news sites.

“I think there’s a huge potential in online journalism, but there’s also a lot of scary stuff out there . . . We have to try to not lose our way,” said one member who, as a part of a three-person operation, does everything from handling tech problems to social media posts to original reporting.

<b>Uneasy Optimism</b>	
2009 Survey of ONA Members	
<b>Where is journalism headed?</b>	
Right Track	45%
Wrong Track	54
<b>Is the Internet changing journalism values?</b>	
Changing	57%
Not Changing	42
<b>Can we find a profitable business model online?</b>	
Very Confident	39%
Somewhat Confident	43
Not Too Confident	11
Not Confident	1

“It’s a good feeling to work in a part of the industry that has hope for the future,” offered another.

These are some of the findings of a survey of nearly 300 members of the Online News Association (ONA), produced jointly with the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), which drafted the questionnaire. Princeton Survey Research Associates administered the survey.

The findings represent the first-ever survey of journalist members of ONA, the largest organized association of digital journalists.<sup>1</sup> The majority of those surveyed work for websites tied to legacy media and most have more than 11 years experience in a newsroom setting.

We do not assume that these results represent the views of all of people in new media, but 10-year-old ONA, with nearly 1,800 members, offers useful insights into how digital journalism is being practiced.

Among the findings:

- A solid majority of those surveyed (57%) say the Internet is “changing the fundamental values of journalism.” The biggest changes, the respondents said, were a loosening of standards (45%), more outside voices (31%) and an increased emphasis on speed (25%).
- When asked what online journalism is “doing especially well these days,” more named aspects of technology like using advancements well (31%) or speed (30%) than named reporting skills like improving storytelling (16%) or exploiting the potential for greater depth (12%).
- Six in 10 (63%) of respondents ranked original reporting as the most important type of information they produce. This was more than four times as much as the second-most important information type: aggregated material from wires and other legacy outlets (13%).
- For the most part, online journalists say they have been spared the kinds of staff cutbacks their legacy brethren experienced in 2008. Many (39%) reported staff increases compared with a year earlier. Another third said their staff numbers have remained the same. Less than a quarter (23%) saw staff decreases.
- Despite current trends, most of these online journalists are pinning their hopes in the future on advertising. Roughly two-thirds of these online journalists predicted advertising would be the most important form of revenue at websites three years from now. Only a quarter of respondents named some other new revenue model.

### **The Future of Journalism**

Overall, the journalists surveyed are less negative about journalism’s future than are journalists from national news organizations surveyed a year earlier, but they are still worried.

Most (54%) said journalism was “headed in the wrong direction” (vs. 45% in the right direction). But this was a much more even split than seen among legacy national journalists a year ago. In that group, 62% voiced pessimism and just 32% optimism—and that was when the economy was stronger.

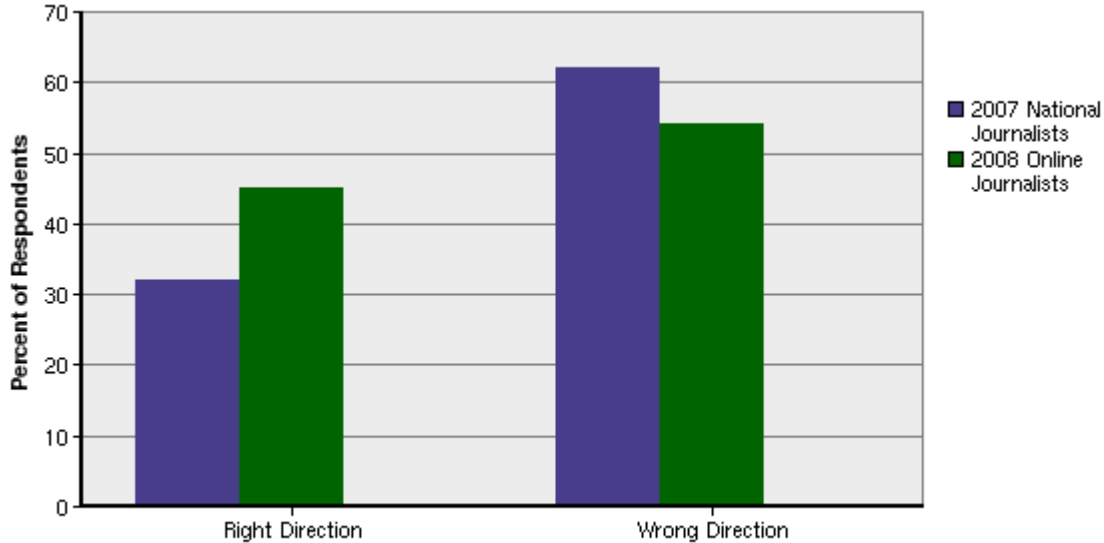
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<sup>1</sup> ONA also has an academic membership segment, which was not included in this survey of online media practitioners.

“Generational change is scary,” wrote the content manager for one of the country’s largest newspaper-based websites, but “We have to live with it, embrace it, be excited for our children and our children’s children and the discoveries they will make.”

“I believe as long as there is news, there always will be a need for professional journalists and the standards they maintain,” wrote another. “Online journalism is already evolving beyond the limits of traditional newsrooms and yet the medium is still in its infancy.”

### The Direction of Journalism

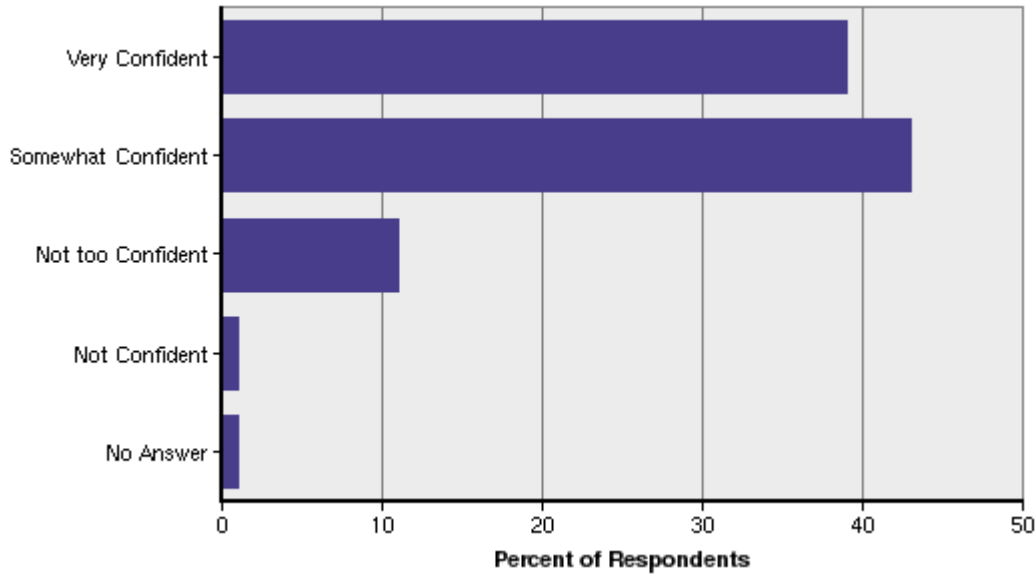


Source: PEJ/ONA 2008 Survey of ONA Members

When it came to the big question looming over the news industry today—future revenue streams—four in 10 respondents were “very confident” that online news would “find a profitable and self-sustaining revenue model.” Similar numbers (43%) were somewhat confident. Only 11% were “not too” confident.

But their comments reflected more stubborn optimism than a clear plan about the future. As the editor in chief of an engineering website and magazine put it, “It’s a difficult environment for journalists with the double whammy of the Internet changing the game and a god-awful economy. We soldier on.”

## Confidence in Finding a Profitable Economic Model



Source: PEJ/ONA 2008 Survey of ONA Members

Indeed, most of these online journalists are pinning their hopes on advertising, even though the trajectory of advertising online is flattening and there are growing doubts about whether it will ever reach a scale that would underwrite the news. When asked what would likely be the most important form of revenue in three years, fully 65% named advertising. And a third specified display advertising, which to date has been the biggest source of online news revenue. But the total dollar amount remains very small with [growth expected to slow considerably](#) for 2008 and 2009. The going display ad rate per 1,000 viewers was a mere 26 cents in 2008, down by half from 2007.<sup>2</sup>

<b>Which do you think will be the most important source for online revenue in 3 years?</b>	
Display ads	32%
Search ads	19
Video ads	14
Subscription fees	7
Fees from aggregators	5
User donations	3
Other	9
No answer	10

<sup>2</sup> [Douglas Quenqua](#), "Display Ad Prices Fell 50 Percent in Q4," ClickZ, January 15, 2006

Another 19% named search advertising, which is on the rise but flows mostly to search engines like Google and Yahoo rather than news sites. And video ads, still in their infancy, but with little evidence yet of their success with either audiences or ad companies, were named by 14%.

Just a quarter of respondents, on the other hand, specified something other than advertising as the most important source of revenue in three years: 7% named subscription fees, 5% named aggregators, 3% named donations from members, and 9% offered a handful of unique suggestions such as providing content to hotels, selling documentary DVDs, setting up a press distribution service and even renting out space in the organization’s garage.

One reason these online journalists may imagine that advertising will be the key is that this is mainly what their sites are working on trying to develop. Fully 69% of respondents said their organizations are working “very actively” to develop new revenue streams. But the biggest area of that work (23%) was advertising.

Another 17% specified finding a way to monetize mobile content, video or RSS, much of which is tied to advertising as well.

<b>New Streams of Revenue Being Explored</b>	
Advertising	23%
Monetizing mobile/ RSS/ Video/ Text	17
Partnerships	12
Developing new websites/ Niche websites	10
Ecommerce/ Transaction revenues	10
New content/ Directories	8
Sponsorships	7
Syndication	7
Verticals	3
Misc. other	15
No answer	37

*Note: Based on those whose for-profit organization is very actively trying to develop new revenue streams [N=155]. Total may exceed 100% due to multiple responses.*

These journalists are aware of the challenge. Far above anything else, economics, or as one respondent put it, “the imploding business model,” was the named (by 42% of respondents) as the biggest problem facing online journalism today.

One ONA member who helps administer content and video products explained, “I’m finding our company wants to lump Web ads into larger sales packages that are primarily for broadcast sponsorships. I’m also finding that the sales staff has no idea how to sell our product.”

And ideas out of the mainstream seemed even harder to come by. Few named such possibilities as directories (8%), sponsorships (7%), syndication (7%), or verticals (3%).

Not all new revenue streams are seen as good ventures. One ONA member expressed dismay at what their company is exploring—selling stories to product-specific websites like Home Depot or Lowe’s. “Companies want that content to make their sites more credible, but . . . the news organization will become less credible because it will appear to be an endorsement of a product or service.”

And the biggest portion of all, 37%, either chose not to or could not specify what their company was doing to find new revenue.

### **Fundamental Values**

The heavy influence of advertising reflects a tension that emerges throughout the survey. Most of these respondents either work for the website of a legacy outlet or are former legacy journalists that started independent online ventures of their own. They are grounded in the more organized, traditional news model and have carried that foundation to the Web. Thus, while embracing much about new media, these journalists also demonstrate a strong belief in traditional values and practices.

With this grounding, a solid majority (57%) say the Internet is “changing the fundamental values of journalism” rather than “transferring those values online.” And the change was deemed more negative than positive.

When asked how it was altering the values, most (45%) cited a loosening of standards and less careful reporting. “It is eliminating the gatekeeper role,” wrote an editor and content manager responsible for both online and print newsroom operations, “pressing journalists to produce without the same degree of reflection and verification.”

“The focus is more on getting the news out before checking its accuracy, and this is weakening journalism’s credibility,” wrote another. “A reversion to checking and double-checking is needed, especially since mistakes can last forever online.”

The second-biggest change in values cited by respondents was one that invited a more divided reaction. Roughly a third, 31%, named giving more voice to others and reducing the clout of journalists. “The news consumer has never had a greater role in policing the veracity of what he or she reads, sees and hears,” offered an executive in charge of editorial and sales for a top local broadcast news website. Yet some saw downsides here. One content manager wrote: “It allows all sorts of unfiltered, untrained and unethical yahoos to donate public comments.”

The third category of change, cited by 25% of respondents, was the shift in values related to the growing emphasis on speed. While some noted positive implications like getting news to people faster, most spoke of immediacy becoming more important than accuracy. As one writer and producer of stories described it, misinformation “gets spread faster than a bad sexually transmitted disease.”

<b>In what way(s) is the Internet changing the fundamental values of journalism?</b> <i>Based on those who say the Internet is changing fundamental values of journalism [N=165]</i>	
Loosening standards/ Less carefulness	45%
Allowing others to have a voice (good & bad)	31
Emphasis on speed (good & bad)	25
Less analysis/ More superficial	11
Advertising and business tainting journalism	8
More opinion/ Bias	7
Less original content/ More context-based	5
MORE transparency/ Openness/ Accountability	5
LESS transparency/ Openness/ Accountability	2
Misc. other	24
No answer	6

*Note: Total may exceed 100% due to multiple responses.*

Other changes cited were mostly negative: 11% said the Internet has made journalism is more superficial. “‘Good enough’ is good enough” wrote one. Journalists, wrote another, are “more willing to shoot from the hip.” Another 8% cited an increased influence from advertisers and other business-side people; and 7% said journalism now has more opinion or bias.

Thus, fully two-thirds of the changes cited here were clearly negative, while the rest were divided.

The reaction is complex one, a mixture of optimism and fear, possibility, and some regret. Many expressed in written statements the tension of both positive and negative implications in the emerging world of online journalism. “It is making it more transparent, it is making it more open to feedback and voices, it is making it more engaging and two-way, wrote one director of digital content. “But it has also cost traditional journalists their status as expert information gatherers, and that could (and likely will) have an impact on our craft in the future as well.”

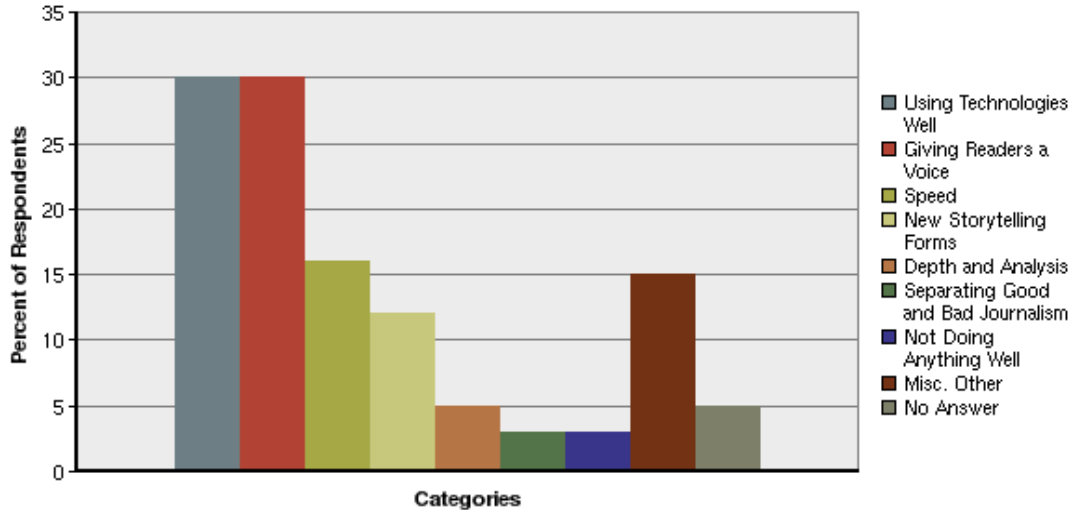
And some, despite some negative implications now, sense that in the end, a better journalism will emerge: “I think we’re now more focused on quantity and speed than we are on quality storytelling and accuracy. With that said, I believe that’s going to change as the Web gets more competitive. Then, our traditional values of journalism will find their place in online news too.”

When asked specifically about what journalism on the Web does particularly well right now, these online journalists spoke more about technology than reporting. As one programmer described it, “We’re really good at putting photos, videos, articles ‘on’ the Web but really bad at understanding the Web as a medium on its own.”

Fully 91% named some aspect of technology in their responses. “Interactivity,” “driving people to slide shows,” and “data visualization,” were among the successes named as well as “connecting viewers around the world,” and “attracting new audiences.”

Just 16%, on the other hand, cited new forms of storytelling like “really digging deep into a subject using new and creative tools at our disposal.” And even fewer (12%) named greater depth of reporting.

### What Online Journalism Does Well



Source: PEJ/ONA 2008 Survey of ONA Members  
 Note: Total may exceed 100% due to multiple responses

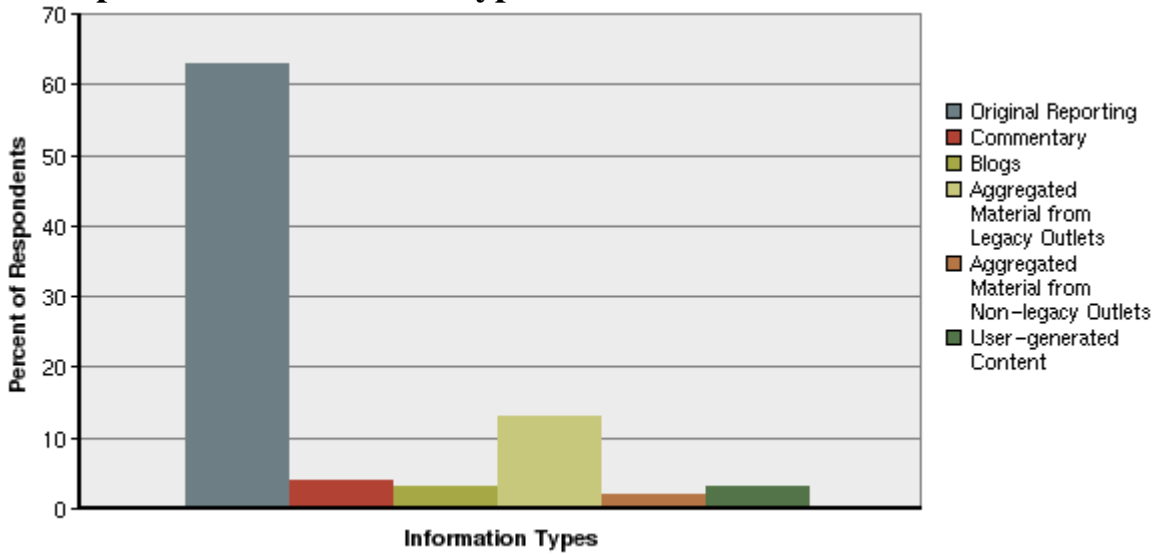
One area where these journalists seem torn, but more in line with new media than old, was on the question of viewpoint. Half felt that it was “a good thing” for news outlets to have an ideological point of view and nearly as many, 45%, felt the same way about individual journalists. While not a clear majority, these journalists working in new media sense more deeply than those in the mainstream press that “it is becoming more acceptable to report news with an obvious voice or bias.” In the [2007 survey of the mainstream press](#), three-quarters of national journalists and 79% of local journalists said it is a “bad thing if some daily news organizations have a decidedly ideological point of view in their coverage of the news.”

### Online Content

The respondents’ ties to traditional reporting were also apparent when they were asked about the content itself, what they produce, and what they see as most important to their brand.

First and foremost is a clear value placed on original reporting. Six in 10 (63%) respondents ranked original reporting as the most important type of information they produce. This was more than four times that of any other type of information listed.

## "Most Important" Information Types on One's Site

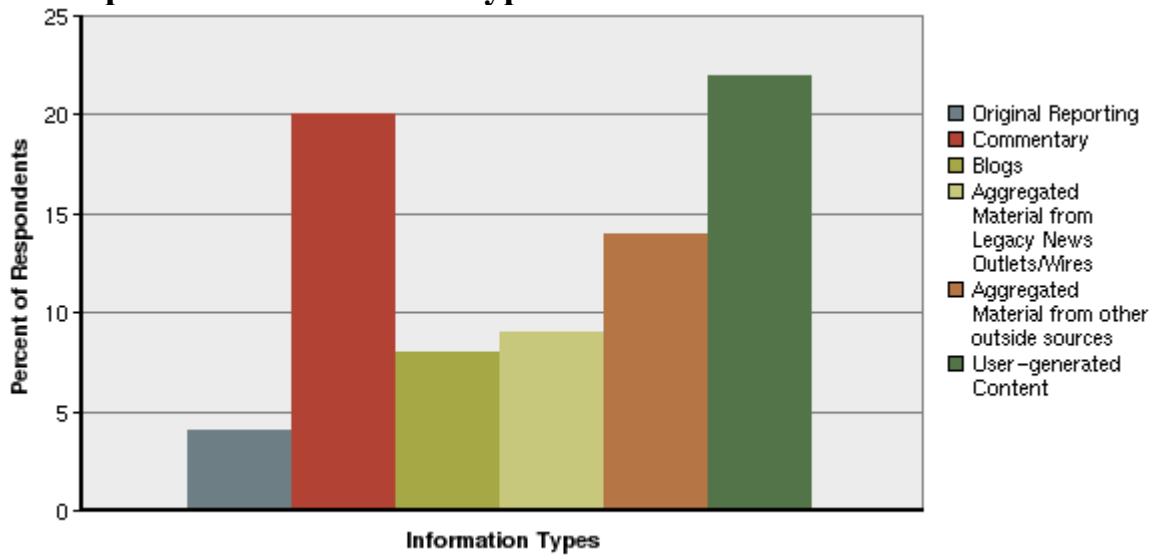


*Source: PEJ/ONA 2008 Survey of ONA Members*

*Note: Data represent the percent of respondents who ranked each item first in importance among the six information types.*

User-generated content, on the other hand, came in at the bottom, with nearly half of the respondents (43%) giving it one of the last two rankings. That was followed by aggregated material from non-legacy outlets, which got one of the lowest two rankings from 32% of those surveyed. Conversely, 32% placed aggregated material from legacy outlets in one of the top two rankings.

## "Least Important" Information Types on One's Site



Source: PEJ/ONA 2008 Survey of ONA Members

Note: Data represent the percent of respondents who ranked each item sixth in importance among the six information types.

These journalists were more mixed about the value of commentary from staff. Just 4% ranked commentary by staff as the most important content, but one in five (20%) ranked it second. Another 20% ranked it last, with the rest falling somewhere in between.

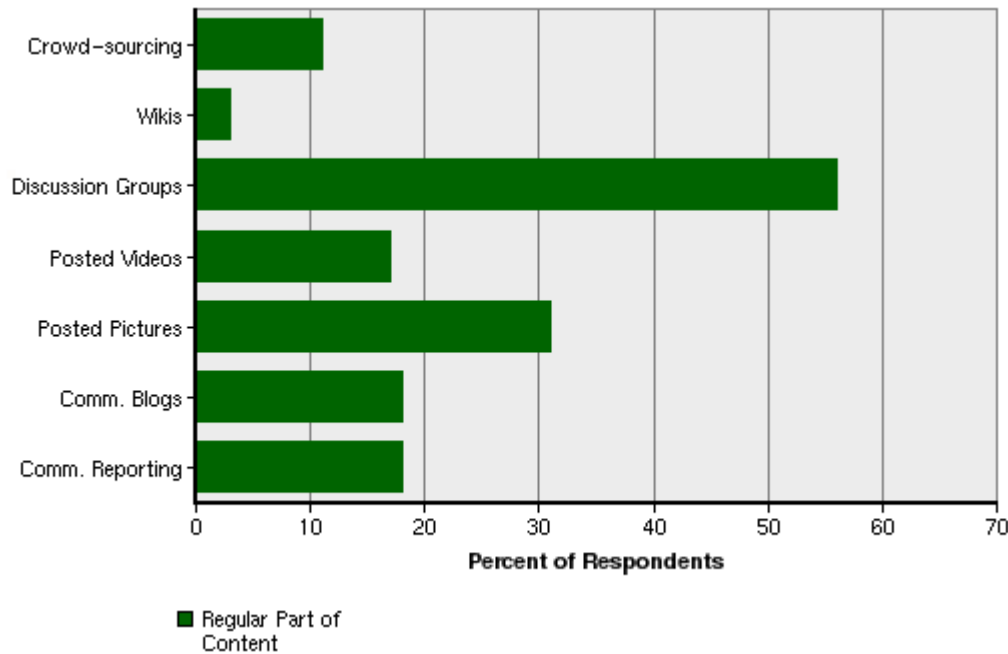
Whether as commentary or original reporting, most new content is staff-produced. A majority of the new content on the site comes from their own organization. Four in 10 (41%) reported that more than 75% of the content is their own original work. Another three in 10 said this is true of more than half of their content.

Respondents did express value in newer types of communication, even if not as evident in their practice. A majority, 54%, see community-produced content on the website as “an essential ingredient for the website of the future.”

“The aggregation of many voices can statistically provide a truer picture of our world than we may have been able to know otherwise,” wrote an ONA member responsible for digital editorial content and product development for their newsroom and interactive department. Others are not so sure. One respondent bluntly stated, “So-called citizen journalism is a failure.”

When it comes to practice, the forms of citizen content appear quite limited. The most popular type cited was comments and discussion groups (56%), but these are hardly seen as the newest or most engaging ways to draw in citizens. Just 31% said community-posted pictures are a regular part of their website. Only 18%, on the other hand, use either community reporting, videos, or blogs, and a mere 3% employ community-based wikis.

## Regular Community Content



*Source: PEJ/ONA 2008 Survey of ONA Members*

And finally, these journalists expressed a solid commitment to editing. Three-quarters of these online journalists said they edit content (other than blog posts) for accuracy as well as typos. Within this statement, though, there is much room for varying standards and practices. Definitions of accuracy may vary, and many respondents expressed specific concerns about the deterioration of strong editing.

### Distribution Methods

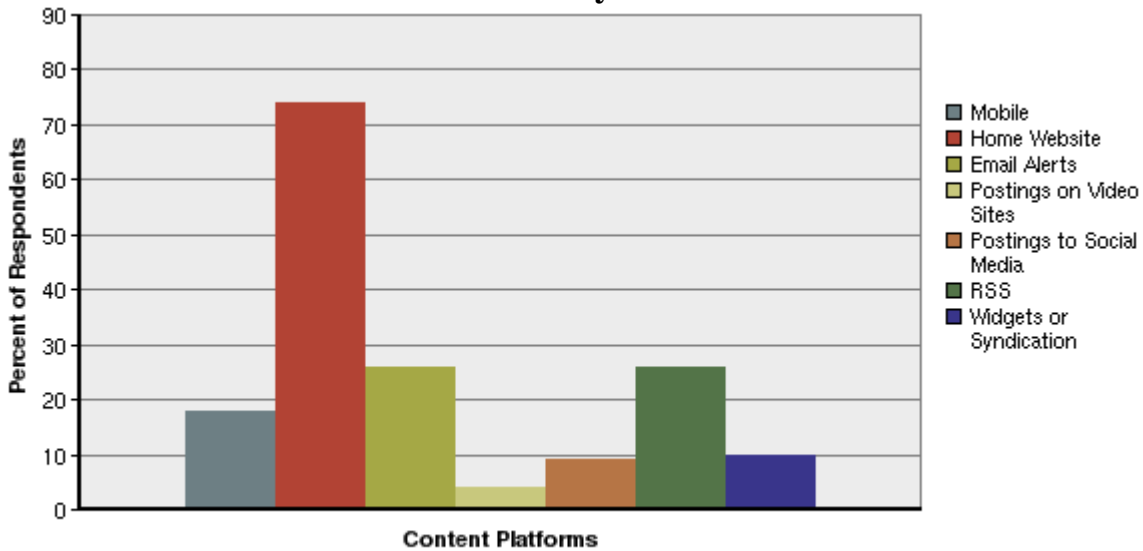
Another area where these journalists have yet to embrace the most cutting-edge thinking is in their management of Web content. These members of ONA are mostly still tied to the model of bringing audiences to their own websites, rather than on pushing their content out.

Research for PEJ's State of the News Media report finds that one of the trends in 2008 was putting more resources toward finding new ways to distribute content rather than solely drawing audiences in. Whether through posts on social media sites like YouTube and Twitter, e-mail updates or mobile delivery methods, news organizations sought ways to get their content into the online stream of information. It was no longer deemed enough to focus on bringing people in; organizations recognized the need to spend as much if not more time actively pushing their content out. Home pages were still a great place to get audiences to land, but innovators in 2008 were looking for more.

Among the ONA respondents, though, website home pages still dominate. Three-quarters of them said their site's home page is "essential to getting their content to users." This is nearly three times the number that named e-mail alerts (26%) and RSS (26%), both of which are also considered [passé forms](#) by many inside the technology industry. Just 9% considered posting to social media sites

essential. Postings on the increasingly popular YouTube were named essential by a mere 4%. And four times as many (18%) said YouTube postings were not at all important.

### Platforms "Essential" to Content Delivery



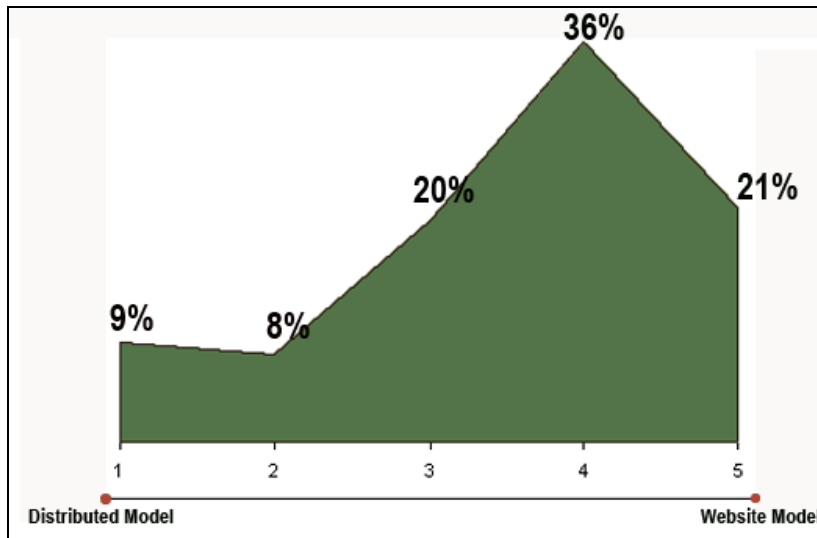
Source: PEJ/ONA 2008 Survey of ONA Members

But that certainly wasn't the sentiment of all. "Help! We're stuck in a dead-tree world and we can't get out!" wrote one member who directs a team of reporters and multimedia producers.

Still, when asked about devoting staff time to various forms of distribution, only the oldest, most accepted forms have become a norm. Clear majorities say their staff spends time blogging (80%) and sending individual e-mails (73%). Fewer, though still majorities, spend time creating RSS feeds (59%) and using social networking tools (59%). Only half (52%) use Twitter or other micro-blogs. And less than half devote staff time to YouTube postings (41%), widgets (38%) or user-based news networks like Digg (29%).

And in the broadest form of this question, which asked whether the journalist's Web site focused more on bringing people into their website or pushing content out, these members described their news outlets as more tied to the website model. On a scale of 1-5, with 'one' being a full focus on distribution and 'five' being a focus on the website, more than half (57%) described their news outlet as a four or a five—with 21% a full five. That is more than twice the percent that describe their approach as fully about distribution (9%).

## The State of Web Content



*Question: On a scale of 1 - 5, does your site expend more staff time pushing content out (distributed model) vs. producing a site for users to browse (website model)?*

If not on the cutting edge, these practices do seem to fit pretty well with where respondents say their traffic comes from. Most respondents (56%) say less than half of their content comes from outside sources like search or e-mail links versus a third (32%) that get more than half of their audience from these outlets. A good number, 13%, seemed uncertain and chose not to answer.

### Partnerships, Profitability and Staffing Trends

One area of development in 2008 was news operations looking for ways to pool their strength. [Revenue-sharing partnerships](#) with other news entities, distributors, advertising firms and technology companies popped up throughout the year. But among these respondents, just a third said their website is in a revenue-sharing partnership. And of those in these partnerships, most do not see them as a key to their economic stability: 45% say they will help the outlet diversify but are not essential and another 23% say they will always be of secondary importance.

The vast majority of these respondents (77%) work in for-profit models. And, contrary to what seems to be state of most online news ventures, a majority, 61%, says their sites are currently turning a profit. But “making a profit” may not be as clear-cut here as in other genres.

First, few of these sites are being forced to carry the full weight of those profits. Two-thirds of those in for-profit models (67%) say their sites are subsidized by their legacy media outlet. Less than a third (29%) are either an online-only entity or fully separate from the legacy outlet.

Looking at the biggest group—those with sites that are subsidized—59% report earning a profit. But the true meaning of profit is often murky, and may have more to do with accounting procedures than actual dollars. If most expenses, such as online staff, for example, come out of the legacy outlet’s budget, it takes little revenue to claim profit.

<b>Profitability of Respondents with For-Profit Websites</b>				
	Legacy-subsidized	Non-subsidized	No Answer	Total
Making Profit	59%	69%	30%	61%
Not Making Profit	32	31%	10	31
No Answer	9	0	60	9

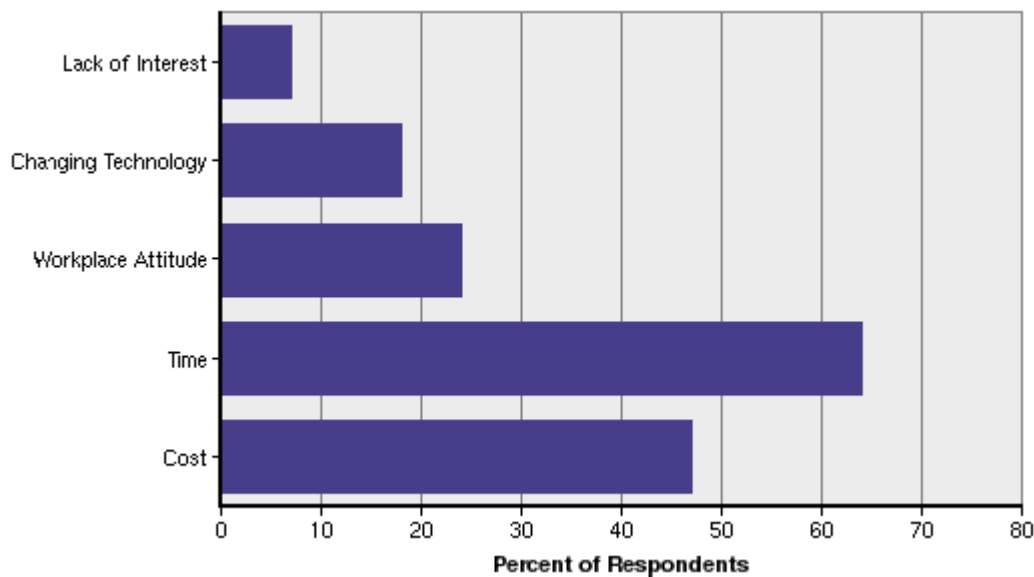
One executive, in charge of both editorial and sales for his organization’s website, expressed the economic challenge of a news organization trying to straddle between the old and new product. “Things were getting much better, until the economic slowdown hit . . . Now most of those responsible for generating online revenue in our company—traditional broadcast sellers who had been embracing online—face intense pressure to bring back traditional dollars that no longer exist. The result is less concentration on online selling.”

Still, online-only entities or those financially separated from their legacy unit were even more likely to cite profits, fully 69%. Granted, this was a smaller group to begin with, and there could be some respondents that work for the same entity, but the high response here may provide some reason to be hopeful.

On another somewhat positive note, these respondents report that for the most part they have been spared the kinds of staff cutbacks their legacy brethren experienced in 2008. Indeed most (39%) reported staff increases compared with a year earlier, and another third said their staff numbers have remained the same. Less than a quarter (23%) saw staff decreases.

And, finally, cost does not seem to be the biggest impediment to learning new technology. While 47% named cost as the biggest obstacle, nearly two-thirds (64%) said the biggest factor was time.

### **"Major Obstacles" in Adapting to Technology**



Source: PEJ/ONA 2008 Survey of ONA Members

## Who They Are

As noted above, these respondents—and the ONA membership overall—tend to have the influence of traditional journalism.

Fully seven out of 10 (71%) work for websites connected to legacy media. Many (41%) work as and editor or content manager, while just under a quarter (23%) serve as directors or executives. Another 20% produce content of some sort.

Two-thirds (66%) have more than 11 years experience in a newsroom setting and 39% have more than 20 years experience. More than half, 54%, have either a bachelor's or master's degree in journalism.

The most common salary range was over \$90,000 (36%) while another 32% earn the next bracket down, \$50,001-\$90,000.

The staffing styles are split between being integrated with the legacy staff (51%) and working separately (48%). Just over a third of respondents (35%) have a full range of positions with specific job titles while another 36% report a small do-it-all staff. Just 10% work independently. But according to one member who oversees Web news content and displays, even staffing structures are murky. “Some days [our organization] operates as one staff, some days it’s two separate staffs. I don’t think any traditional news organization has a real handle on it.”

## **Methodology**

This report is based on responses from 292 members of the Online News Association in the United State and around the world. The survey was administered online in English by Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI). The surveys were completed from January 7 through February 14, 2009.

Requests for participation were sent to a total of 1,201 individuals via e-mail, with a link to an online Web address where the survey was hosted by PSRAI. Each respondent had a unique identification number with which he or she could log in to the survey.

### **Definition of Population Universe and Contact Procedures**

The universe of potential respondents was defined as journalists who are members of the Online News Association. An individual news organization can and does have more than one ONA member on staff. The invitations were sent to the individual members and not to the organizations.

ONA members were first e-mailed on January 7, 2009, explaining the study and requesting their participation. E-mail messages included a link to the online survey as well as a unique password to gain entry into the Web instrument. Follow-up e-mail messages were sent on January 14, January 22 and February 3, to those who did not already complete the survey or did not refuse to participate.

### **Response Rates**

A total of 292 members of the 1,201 member list completed the survey, or 24 percent.

### **Demographics**

More than one-third of those surveyed were employed by a traditional newspaper. More than 13 percent worked for an independent website, while another 13 percent were at a multi-platform network, such as ABCNews.com or CNN.com. Magazines, portal websites and wire services were the workplaces of another 5 to 6 percent, respectively, of those who were sent the survey.

### **Occupation**

One-third of the survey recipients are editors or content managers; more than a quarter describe themselves as directors or managers of their organizations. Ten percent held positions as writers or reporters and another 10 percent were content producers.