Online Magazines Explore Media Future

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Editor's Note: What do you think the publication of the future will look?

NEW YORK (AP) - The Web edition of a cover story from Fortune this spring took a sharp turn from what you might expect at a 79-year-old magazine. Dispensing advice on finding a job during a recession, the piece had a soundtrack, a troupe of improv actors from Chicago and about 4,000 fewer words than your average magazine feature. Instead of scrolling through a column of text, readers (if the term can be applied) flipped through nine pages that told the story with a mix of text, photo-illustrations, interactive graphics and video clips.
No one is quite sure what journalism will look like when the Internet is done with it, but as Fortune executive editor Steve Koepp put it, "If you're wondering what does the future of Fortune.com [1] look like, it may be something like this."

Fortune can't take all the credit for trying to push storytelling a little further into the digital unknown. It had help from a much younger upstart, Flyp Media, that hopes to make these sorts of projects its stock and trade.

An online magazine operating a little more than a year, Flyp (pronounced "Flip") has no foot in journalism past. Its reporters — mostly freelancers — conceive of their stories as Internet creatures beginning to end.

"The idea isn't just to write a story and then add a video or an audio piece," explains Flyp senior editor Matthew Schaeffer. "It's to really figure out the best way to conceptualize these stories as multimedia pieces."

Flyp, which operates with a staff of about a dozen in a small set of offices in Manhattan, retains some traits of its ink and paper predecessors. Its staff and freelancers assembled a range of material for each biweekly issue, from short editorials on subjects like China's currency policy to in-depth features and photo spreads. Its Web site even reproduces the swishing noise of a magazine page being turned.

But without the constraints of putting out a print edition, Flyp is free to emphasize storytelling techniques that would not translate back onto the presses.

Even calling them "stories" might not be appropriate. "Experiences" is how Schaeffer refers to Flyp's work, which sometimes comes in the form of simple computer animation with voiceover or a series of video interviews.

Flyp's CEO, Alan Stoga, insists the site is not trying to dumb down content by de-emphasizing the written word, but simply wants to "engage the audience on a number of different levels."

The idea comes from an old print hand. Ramon Alberto Garza joined the Mexican daily newspaper El Norte nearly three decades ago at age 17 and rose to executive editor before founding a Spanish-language site called Reporte Indigo a few years ago. It specializes in the same multimedia approach as Flyp. The sites are operated separately, but owned and financed by Mexican entrepreneur Alfonso Romo.

Fortune magazine liked what it saw enough to try Flyp a second time. (The magazine isn't paying Flyp for the experiments.)

In April, the magazine published a whopping 11,000-word investigation on Bernard Madoff's Ponzi scheme. The story ran in standard online form, with photos and links to related stories, but the text stood center stage.

Readers were also invited to see Flyp's take, which was posted at Fortune.com [1] as well. Its version opens on a large portrait of Madoff's face, winking at the audience as headlines gradually materialize alongside. The second page features a video introduction something like a TV news segment or documentary explaining Fortune's investigation. Flyp slashed the word count on the text piece, broke some of the copy out into moving, push-button graphics and ended the article with a quiz resembling a video game on the history of financial hucksters.

So is this what the magazine of the future looks like? And perhaps more critically, can the magazine of the future turn a profit?

The recession has brought the print industry's troubles into startling focus. The Publishers Information Bureau said magazine ad pages fell by 26 percent in the first quarter. Income from Web sites hasn't replaced the old revenue streams. Several titles have shut down or gone online only.

To be sure, Flyp is grappling with some of the same issues that keep traditional media executives up at night — how to drive traffic to the site and turn it into enough cash from advertisers to keep the lights on and pay freelancers.

Flyp won't give out traffic numbers. And the site is only now gearing up to include ads.

On top of that, Flyp faces a hurdle that most other publications have not had to grapple with: The site doesn't play well with Google, leaving it in something of an Internet no man's land. Search engines have only recently developed algorithms that can catalog the text on pages heavy with Flash animation, which Flyp relies on, and for now Flyp's site is mostly impenetrable to Google's crawlers.

Dan Tylkowski, a designer at Flyp, said a team of developers is looking at ways around the problem. Flyp's articles are also posted in standard text form to draw search traffic, but the site's designers would rather see readers directed to the real thing.

Flyp's method is just one way of telling a story online, as Fortune's Koepp points

out. Aggregators, blogs, "tweets" — "There's a million different experiments going on," Koepp said.

Still, he's pleased with what Flyp has been able to do with Fortune stories. The magazine has even handed over its list of upcoming features and told Flyp to choose what it wants to work on.

"It's just an exciting new way to present the information to the reader," Koepp said. "It's a little taste of the future."

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