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SHOPTALK:

Imagining the 21st-Century Personal News Experience

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By: Bill Densmore

Last year we interviewed more than 85 journalists, educators, technologists, researchers, activists and citizens to gather a picture of how the news "ecosystem" must change to sustain journalism. The resulting report for the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute is called "From Persona to Payment." (http://tinyurl.com/rji-report)   In it, experts describe the need for news organizations to rethink advertising to make it more personalized and 1-to-1, to collaborate, and to help their users manage their personal information and privacy.

Here's what we envision as the best 21st-century news service based on coordinated integration of 2015-era technology.

A news consumer scenario, 2015

Jane Doe is up at 6 a.m. on a weekday. She wants a current update on the news that matters in her life. That's information that could affect her family, her work, and the ideas and things she's passionate about.

News to Jane is not just what would be on the front page of the newspaper she no longer subscribes to in print. To Jane, news is what her friends and colleagues think is important. Jane subscribes to a service that finds news for her. The newsroom of the her local newspaper is an affiliate and helps curate the stories and comment threads that comprise the Daily Update that arrived in her email box just after 6 a.m. It's similar to hundreds of daily updates put out by news purveyors using email list technologies, except no other person besides Jane has received the exact package of 24 items that she is about to swipe through on her mobile device.

Even though the 24 information items in her Daily Update are from 24 different publishers, Jane gets all this information with a single, monthly subscription to her local "InfoValet" affiliate. Because of a microaccounting system used by the service, some of the money Jane pays her local affiliated news organization is parceled out to other publishers based on usage. Jane doesn't have to do anything for this to occur; it's a result of networked subscription revenue sharing among the publishers.

Not all of the items reached Jane because of her expressed or inferred preferences. A few items— Jane can specify how many she wants—are provided by her local news organization—the affiliate to which she pays a digital subscription fee monthly.

For Jane, this service is a by-request, on-demand, continuously updating and customizable view of the information landscape that matters to her. It's is her personal information companion.

Everything described in the Jane Doe scenario is possible with technology available today, and maybe even recognizable as applied in other contexts.   For them to be integrated in a simple user experience here's some of what's needed:

Personalization: More systems need to emerge that can elegantly match the words and ideas in millions of news and information resources to the expressed or inferred interests of news-organization users like Jane. This process, often called "semantic analysis" is an active field of computer science.

Atomization: Users want information from everywhere in a custom, personal package. Publishers must collaborate on a common method for tagging the price of their content for "atomic" (single item) sale across a network. The network needs to aggregate payments from users and distribute them to the publishers. Publishers need to be willing to experiment with pricing in various contexts.

Privacy: Brands and "InfoValet" operators need to agree to respect user privacy preferences for the use of extensive online behavioral tracking data collected on individuals so that users will trust and value their services.

Identity: News organizations need to acquire the technology expertise necessary to assemble and manage the "personas" of their users, giving users control over how that persona is used. They might do this independently, or in collaboration with Internet platform companies. But the format and type of data stored and shared must be standardized.

Bill Densmore is a Reynolds Journalism Institute Fellow and co-founder of Taxonometrics Inc. (http://www.taxonometrics.me)