# DEAN'S DIGITAL WORLD

## By Dean Tudor

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# The Reporter's Friend

"Hello, Sweetheart? Get me rewrite!"

That was the phone call made by journalists until the mid-'70s, with reporters on the scene phoning in their stories of breaking news (a tradition begun over a hundred years before with the telegraph), usually from a payphone. And the payphone may have been occupied by a cub reporter from his own paper, to reserve it and also to prevent the competition (the other papers) from filing their stories. To everybody at that time, online meant "on the landline phone". Only the police had radio mobile phones.

There were both morning and evening papers with several editions a day to report current news as it arrived. Reporters phoned in their accounts of riots, elections, trials, fires, et al., and a researcher at the paper augmented and fleshed out the details with material from the library and morgue, or from interviews with experts and spokespersons. Radio was limited: most announcers just read out the news from that day's paper, giving us the phrase "rip and read". Television was regarded as just a "two-ton pencil" because of its heavy equipment and need for a camera crew and producer as well as the talking head. TV was also known as "radio with pictures".

Then came the computerization of typesetting in the early 1960s, the tape cassette in 1965, followed by the miniaturization of the TV camera and VCR in the 1970s, the enormous labour costs and expenses of newspapers, and the computer – principally, the desktop PCs and Apples of 1982. Today's reporter has a video cell phone, a wireless Internet laptop, a satellite transmitter, a Blackberry...These high tech tools extend reporters' reach and sharpen their journalism. The global village of databases, newsgroups, and websites, with access to stories, sources and background, make their stories more complete and credible.

And through it all – over the years — there was "SOURCES"...

Publisher Ulli Diemer has asked that I contribute an overview of how *Sources* has changed as a resource for journalists and researchers over the past three decades. Something along the lines of "*Sources* in its context", the context of changes in the media and the practice of journalism generally.

Published on July 2, 2002, "25 Years of *Sources*" was an article in Number 50, which reviewed the first quarter century.

Founder Barrie Zwicker explained, "It's a cliché that every story has two sides. An untrue cliché. Most have several. The reporter's challenge is digging out all sides. *Sources* can help."

Here we are with issue 59, five years after that. I'm not going to repeat that original article, but I will note that the nature of journalism had changed dramatically during that 30 year period, and the changes have escalated even more over the past five.

And *Sources* has changed with it.

The changes at *Sources* began with the development of specialized information resources, such as Embassy Row (a listing of consular reps in Canada), Fame and Fortune (a listing of writing awards in Canada), *Parliamentary Names & Numbers* (a listing of federal and provincial governments in Canada). Connexions (a listing of alternative and self-help groups in Canada) was brought over by its founder Ulli Diemer (who became manager of *Sources* in 1995, and then publisher in 1999) and the latest one, launched in 2000, *Media Names & Numbers* (a listing of print and broadcast media in Canada). These are all available as both print, and later as Internet computer searchable versions.

*Sources* is thus more than just experts. It is a pathway directory to the essentials of democracy, making available names and addresses of all the movers and shakers in Canada and beyond.

During this same period, journalism produced more helpful guides and writings based on the need to be more competitive without spending more money. Freelancers began writing the longer service piece, for both newspapers and magazines. Television embraced documentaries, finding it cheaper to produce them (or buy from freelancers) than to maintain news bureaus around the world. Journalism schools began to change their curricula to allow for more of this information-based writing. I had developed an Information Resources for Journalists program at what is now Ryerson University in 1982, the first year of the PC/Apple; this course promoted the use of contacts, libraries, reference works and computer databases in the pre-Internet years.

*Sources*, then only five years old, was a strong component of that course. How else could students learn about where to find people passionately concerned about their endeavours in any

field in Canada? I shamelessly got free copies for my students, in exchange for a *Sources* house advert by myself exhorting the use of *Sources*' subject index. This quid pro quo worked for many years, and Barrie Zwicker even came and spoke to my students.

Aside: I understand that the index problem has not gone away – some journalists still don't use the index, preferring to just browse through the book. Now, it can be a searchable PDF and a bit easier to use. But due to current cutbacks in the media, there are scores of freelance journalists who have to spend a great deal of time dreaming up story ideas which they can then pitch to an editor. The print edition of *Sources* is great for that use, something to curl up with, and freelancers now browse through both the subject index AND the listings. The peek-a-boo effect of computer searching is just not applicable here. As publisher Diemer says, "You browse through the print edition and find out about all sorts of organizations and issues that you never knew about or hadn't thought about as a story idea. It's the power of serendipity. Finding what you didn't know you were looking for is often as good as finding what you were looking for, or thought you were looking for."

*Sources* launched its website in 1995. *Sources* was not new to computers; it had played around with faxback responses to queries, and had investigated CD-ROMs and other forms of database manipulation by computer tapes. Since *Sources* was printed up via computer, it had all this electronic information with nowhere to go. I had signed on as a dollar-a-year man called "Informatics Consultant" in the early 1990s, and then began writing a twice-a-year column, which sometimes was a little out of date because of the lag in publication times. Ah, well...

*Sources* registered the www.sources.com Internet domain name in 1994, as well as www.sources.ca. But www.sources.net went to a web marketer, and somebody is squatting on sources.org. and sources.info. *Sources*.biz is free as of this writing, should you want it for yourself. The singular Source.com is a communication provider, while source.ca is an office furniture supplier. "The Source" used to be Radio Shack.

Over the past thirty years, to enhance the bottom line and to cut costs, journalism had scaled back its competitiveness. How? Read on...

Some publishers have abandoned print. Thomson Learning, its last print holding, is up for sale. They want $5- to $6-billion for the largely textbook operation, which has been the least profitable division for Thomson. They'll take that money and buy more electronic databases. Thomson will soon have only research, legal, scientific, and financial bits of data – with no or little commentary and reportage. This movement has affected *Sources* too; it has cut back on paper versions and paper deliveries, giving away its PDF version.

Television and radio have consolidated. Networks have purchased stations and other networks, cut back on news programming (NBC expects most of its upcoming 2007 job cuts to be in its news divisions), and merged with the Internet. Radio seems to be only music these days, and most US radio stations are owned by one company (Clear Channel Communications). The CBC faces continual cutbacks from whichever political party is in power. Television networks, even the news divisions, are driven by demographics and advertising; they see the Internet as their main threat despite the niche marketing of specialized channels.

The newspaper sector in Canada and the United States is struggling with both declining circulation and advertising revenues. Newspapers are seen as poor investments, yet most are publicly-held companies. Some investors want to bail out, and there are local people who are thrilled to buy a newspaper at a distress-sale price. The collapse of newspaper chains should encourage local news and their own local points of views. The

Baltimore Sun is being locally purchased from Tribune Co. in the US. The New York Times is selling the Boston Globe to a local consortium in Boston. The McClatchy papers bought the Knight-Ridder chain and then resold that former chain's Philadelphia newspapers to a local group (one of the group said "I'm having a blast"). *The Los Angeles Times* may be bought from Tribune Co. by local billionaires. In Canada, Torstar may be on the block if the family ownerships cannot agree amongst themselves. Both the CanWest papers and the National Post have been rumoured as being up for sale for years. Could some of the Quebecor English-language papers be next? The Thomson family (again, a local publisher) has bought back more control (40%) of the *Globe and Mail.* I have a good friend who bought a local paper in New Mexico, and he loves it. Writer Paul Waldie has said that there seems to be a new breed of rich people who want to save their local papers for a modest profit or for nostalgia...

Magazines have been on shaky ground for some time. There is declining circulation just about everywhere. Specialist magazines have replaced general ones, and they are all chasing after the same advertisers. The wine and food magazines are angry at the LCBO's freebie "Food & Drink" because it is a government-produced magazine that draws ads away from the private sector. Newsmagazines have been on a death watch for over a decade and are constantly re-inventing themselves in order to retain subscribers. The weekly "TV Guide" in Canada has recently abandoned its print version, while the television supplements in the newspapers have shrunk considerably. Ken Whyte has another take on *Maclean's* magazine.

And then, there's the juggernaut...

The Internet (and its electronic predecessors) has probably been responsible for most of the changes in journalism. The Internet is just the graphic manifestation of the electronic version of data. Computer tapes of information and the idea of electronic networks have been around for the past fifty years. I can remember programming in COBOL in the mid-sixties for a network of libraries. We've just moved on, where databases are on the Internet (see my last column six months ago on the Invisible Web). News sources have taken their electronic tapes and discs and made electronic websites out of them. Great gobs of storage space and miniaturization have created the present state of news coverage on the web. So has *Sources* adapted, moving all of its databases to its website.

The Internet, through its speed, has changed the way we gather, report, and present the news, and the way that that news is read. Also, it has changed how much of the news we need, and how much background is needed for that news so we can better understand the why and how. There is less need for interpretation. With such sites as Yahoo's Full Coverage, readers can find lots of information for themselves (sidebars, photos, video, charts, and off-site links) on cutting edge topics or breaking news.

While newspapers are declining in the circulation of their printed matter, they are gaining new readers for their websites. This affects how news reports are shaped, and the need for experts. This need has been changing. Google has just bought JotSpot, which introduced a new set of wiki tools for shared pages such as spreadsheets, photo albums, web pages, and word processing documents. Wiki tools help to develop online collaboration between people, reducing writers' need for experts even more. Unfortunately, according to *Maclean's* writer Steve Maich, "we are trading in authoritative and accurate for cheap and convenient". Wiki tools tend to establish the truth by consensus of writing. To the eyes of most people, there is little difference between a newspaper website and a wiki site: the Internet is a great leveler, bringing everyone and every user to the same degree of knowledge or ignorance. According to Maich, Wikipedia itself is predicated on the belief that thou-

sands of contributors can act as freelance fact checkers producing a reliable reference document. A million monkeys typing away in a million years will produce...etc. There are all kinds of bad advice on the Internet, some of it done on purpose. Responsible freelancers need to go to *Sources* in order to get a responsible expert to clarify or comment on a responsible story.

And how much is a directory like *Sources* needed to find contacts and experts? For the amateurs on the Internet (news junkies and bloggers), probably not much. But *Sources* is available on the web to all, not just to reporters and researchers. The listed contents at *Sources* are just an email click away from a request for information. No more phone calls limited to business hours (or weekends) – just 24/7 availability via email, most likely to a Blackberry Pearl.

*Sources* is quite open about its competition. At www.sources.com/links/ you'll find related links for many American experts plus a few more Canadian ones (Sources Select Links and Resources). Included are other directories and indexes, libraries, beats and subject sites, government, business, computers, and others. Some of the expert sites include ProfNet and writers.ca.

Other new useful *Sources* items, ones that draw reporters to the website, include a calendar of events www.sources.com/ SSOCal.htm and the News Releases that are Google-searchable www.sources.com/News.htm and www.sources.com/ NewsArchive.htm If as a journalist you are at all interested in what the paying customers of *Sources* read, then check out the freely available www.hotlink.ca which lists news and sites of Select Media Relations Resources such as the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers, the Canadian Marketing Association, the Canadian Public Relations Society, and the International Association of Business Communicators.

The reach of *Sources* is enormous. Alexa (www.alexa.com), which is the top spot for monitoring usage on the Internet, reports that there was a daily reach of 30 per million users, and an eyeball count of 5.6 pages per user. 99% of people stay on sources.com and search for more data. If they go elsewhere, then they go on to ProfNet, Sources2, Experts.Com (all US sites with US material) or JournalismNet. Some even go on to my own Megasources site! Further, Alexa reports that *Sources* is fast loading, with an average time of 1.3 seconds, and that 158 other sites directly link to *Sources*. Google reports that 750 have direct linkage.

In 2002, some 13,000 distinct users a month reached the *Sources* web page. By August 2006, that number has almost tripled to about 32,000. According to the *Sources* log, the August Listings were viewed 139,404 times (4,500 times a day). The most popular listing in August was looked at more than 1,500 times, whereas the least popular listing was looked at fewer than ten times. The News releases were viewed 12,843 times in August (414 a day). From analyzing the statistics, *Sources* feel that roughly half the people who use the Listings and News releases do so by coming to the *Sources* site directly and then searching or browsing the site, while the other half arrive via a search done on a search engine. Some News releases on the *Sources* site turn up higher in the Google results precisely because *Sources* is a highly ranked site and so anything on the *Sources* site will appear higher in Google results. Similarly, the Listings are popular because all the expertise (names and numbers) for that source is given on one visible page, along with its mandate and subject headings. This is a tidier presentation for the search engines. As publisher Diemer says, "It's all part of

our two-pronged strategy (a) to make sure *Sources* is well-known so that people will use it, and (b) to try to make it as likely as possible that journalists and communicators will find *Sources* even if they are doing a search on the Web and don't know about, or aren't thinking about, *Sources*."

Traditional news businesses have been cutting costs through the use of the Internet. Over the past few years, we have seen the term "convergence" come and go and then come again. Media concentration is at its highest levels in the electronic world of broadcast and Internet. All of this has meant fewer articles being written by fewer journalists – but those few articles are being given a wider distribution than ever before.

Consequences? Fewer journalists on staff, for one thing. And this has to have an impact on both operating bottom lines and on requests for experts. Instead of four newspapers writing different versions of the same story, using different "exclusive" experts, you've got maybe two versions with one being syndicated or used down the line by other papers and one being used locally. And perhaps with just the one expert since there is no news competition. Many staffers have also been replaced by freelancers who enjoy low rates of pay (for example, my rate for doing this column hasn't changed since I started in the mid-nineties) and peanuts for syndication. The Heather Robertson case (freelancer royalties for database re-usage) against Infoglobe still continues in the court system, and it began sometime in the last century.

In another context, fewer reporters are doing more stories because the stories are shorter. Stories appear in both print and on the web. You can thank *USA Today* for that concept, back in 1982. Writing for the web is a lot like hack writing: be clear and concise, forget about deep research, and keep it all to one web page. On an hourly basis, writers can get more stories done for the money-conscious bosses. This means that more sources are needed for more stories faster, and these sources need to be currently available. Advertising supports shorter stories in both print and web versions, since research shows that the powerful 14 to 34-year-old age group suffers from some kind of print ADD, and prefer shorter stories. Yet the age group most likely to read a newspaper in print are the 65+ and advertisers need to slant their products to that group, which makes for much grey matter in the newspaper. A valid response by a publisher may be to include more stories about older folk. And this has implications for contacts/experts.

More journalists and non-journalists have created blogs, which are mainly full of opinions or unverified sightings. This has implications for many experts since they are not being used to get their message out, and blogs tend to take on a life of their own, especially when indexed by a search engine. Everything appears equal in intent, whether it is a respected news article from the *Globe and Mail* or some blogger's whine. Discrimination needs to be put into play here, and this can be a potential problem.

Another nightmare that faces media is this: Internet search engine advertising is growing at a tremendous rate (it will overtake online display adverts in 2006), and will overtake advertising revenue in media sometime soon (which is why media adverts are declining in revenue). We all use Google and Yahoo everyday; we become another eyeball for advertisers.

Articles from previous issues of *Sources* address some of these issues; check out www.sources.com/SSR.htm

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