CNN.com Analysis

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Overview
This article discusses the CNN website, and incorporates a summary of its role within the genre of national and international news sites. CNN’s competitors include CNBC (www.cnbc.com), MSNBC (www.msnbc.msn.com), and the New York Times (www.nytimes.com); those sites are also examined in order to form summaries regarding the genre.

The analysis includes comments regarding the structure, content and behavior of the CNN site. A segment considers the writers and developers of the CNN site, and components intended to court certain audience types. Finally, I forecast how I might utilize the information I’ve learned in this research.

Development and Prominence
CNN is a benchmark in news media. Having been founded in 1980 as the first provider of 24-hour broadcast news, CNN gained credibility among its competitors. Besides offering news updates on more mundane topics, CNN became a wellspring of information during national elections. In addition, audiences chose CNN broadcasts during times of national crises, such as the attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan (1981), the Persian Gulf War (1990-91), the Oklahoma City bombing (1995), and the al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001. The public trusted they would be informed quickly of new information on developing stories.¹

As the internet developed, CNN.com became a site of choice for many Americans who wanted to be sure they were able to view the latest in a developing story. CNN.com benefited from the name-recognition of

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<th>US top 10 online news portals ranked by number of unique visitors for the week ending March 23, 2003</th>
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* In millions for the week ending March 23

its sister site in broadcast news, and today is the most trusted and prominent internet news portal. 

Writers & Developers of the CNN Web Site

Like other recognized news sites that had origins in national broadcast and print media, CNN.com was able to command immediate recognition and credibility. Stories found on the site can originate from the Associated Press (AP) wire service or from featured writers. In stories originating from the AP, as in the story shown below, the Associated Press vouches for the story’s credibility in lieu of an author’s reputation.

In other cases, writers are named in bylines beneath the stories. Credited correspondents often seem to have titles such as “senior correspondent”. Less experienced or minor writers seem to go unnamed, as if the content is a CNN team effort. In addition to the feeling of an organizational effort, it is obvious that fewer attribution lines are also a mechanism in which to save space.

In order to retain their market share of internet news audiences, developers of the CNN site must be leaders in their field. First, the site structure must be pleasing and must convey the feel of a serious news site. At the same time there must be adequate white space so that viewing the page doesn’t seem difficult and annoying.

The developers must also be savvy about expanding development of hardware and software technology. A developer can never congratulate himself that he is finished. Individuals employed by the website need to stay savvy about offering news through a variety of emerging media. At present, the CNN.com audience takes for granted the offerings of podcasts, desktop alerts, RSS feeds, blogs and videos; they would expect that by next year other technologies would also be available on the site.

Artists and Advertisements
Imagine a web page without visual art. Photographic images, graphs, videos and drawings are necessary on the CNN.com site. Editors must choose professional images which are timely and may be evocative, which can assist in conveying the emotional effect of featured events.

Innovative photos and artwork are often found in accompanying ads. In these cases, the emphasis is on color, design, and symmetry. Since the audience knows the purpose of the ad is to sell a product or service, the ad artists need to appeal to the viewer’s sense of beauty or humor in order to hold their attention. In this way, advertisements add value to a news website instead of detracting from them.

Users may also check quick video clips, which offer insights (such as body language of the speaker) that print media cannot. There are usually several videos offered daily.

Audiences & Users of the CNN Web Site
Audiences may find an Internet news service appealing because they want their news fast and free. Readers may only have a few minutes to glance over the site, so they want the most comprehensive information available from the homepage. And they can do so without breaking their budget paying for a newspaper subscription.

With so many featured topics from which to choose on the navigation bar, CNN.com can claim that their site serves persons of every social status and age group. Many readers bookmark this site for daily news. Their daily visits will include glancing at headlines for information of interest, and clicking on links that appeal to them. Given enough time and access, they may check throughout the day for breaking stories, especially those dealing with weather and stock market information.

From the home page, adults seeking hard news may select tabs dealing with the U.S. and world news, crime, business or politics. That selection will lead to a page featuring several links to related stories. Those links then connect to the story page, which is usually a page in length, and includes links to related stories.

Younger audiences may be choosing tabs leading to “softer” entertainment content. From the home page, they may choose a topic more palatable to them – found by clicking the entertainment, health, technology, travel, living, or sports tabs. Although the very young may not yet be interested in “hard” news topics, CNN.com can gain them as a viewer while they are young – and may retain them when their interest in “hard” news deepens.

Another draw for younger audiences might include high school and college students interested in a journalistic career. CNN.com accepts submissions of original videos via iReport. Offering this opportunity makes sense for both CNN and the amateur cinematographer. CNN may be able to feature a unique film at a reasonable (amateur) cost. And a featured amateur may utilize the opportunity to prove their entertainment or journalistic potential.

Users of this site may see other advantages to viewing news on the Internet, such as the ability to monitor breaking news -- like the 9/11 attacks, severe weather, and local disasters -- without the necessity of a television. Also, battery powered laptops makes monitoring news and weather possible even while in the grip of events such as power outages or tornados.
Developers work to provide accessibility to all segments of the population, including those who might have difficulty viewing or hearing information on the site. For instance, with the use of tags and audio options, CNN provides some accessibility to the visually impaired.

**Format & Organization of the CNN Web Site**

- **Header: Logo and Search Field**
  In the header of CNN.com, branding appears in the upper left corner. Adjacent to the logo, a prominent search field is centered in the header. This search field allows viewers to search the CNN site. It could be argued that the search field is the most prominent component on the page, once again denoting the importance the organization places on providing information to the reader.

- **Regular Features Navigation Bar**
  Beneath the header is the navigation bar. Regular features appear as a row of tabbed topic links near the top of the site. The tabs are comparable to sections found in a newspaper – Sports, Entertainment, Markets, etc. Since CNN is attracting both a younger and older audience, there is a great variety of topics listed in the navigation bar. The font is usually small to accommodate the large number of topics that must fit in the table. Where newspapers may have divided their coverage into several individual sections of newsprint, their Internet counterparts have instead set up prominent tabs on topics such as headline news, entertainment, sports, and markets to allow readers quick access to content.

- **Hot Topics Bar**
  Beneath the Navigation Bar is the Hot Topics Bar. The Hot Topics Bar gives the appearance that news on the site is quickly updated. Whereas the Navigation Bar features do not change, the Hot Topics Bar beneath it helps the site appear less rigid, and that there is a fluid flow of information on the site.

- **Featured News Stories in the Left Column**
  The page beneath the “Hot Topics” links is divided into two columns, the one on the left being approximately twice as wide as the column on the right. Since we read from left to right, items placed on the left are read first. The importance of text and graphics found in the left column is denoted both by its position to the left of the center, and by its girth. Note the page layout displayed on the following page.

  The lead story on the left usually consists of a prominent photograph, much larger than the photography to the right, along with a lead paragraph. The entire story can be found on a secondary page by clicking a link. In addition, the left column contains links to other lead stories, under the “Latest News” heading.

  Beneath the lead story are blogs, RSS feeds, podcasts, all the interactive topics displaying prominent headlines in red. Alongside these offerings are the local weather and news links with black headlines.
• **The Right Column – “The Fun Stuff”**
On the right are nodes that are less dependent upon text. This column is half as wide as the left column, which denotes that stories situated within it are less important. However, items on the right may appeal more to some audiences because they appear “more fun”. Topping the right column is a choice of 3 news videos. The right column contains a live link to the CNN television broadcast. This column also displays a prominent featured advertisement for an outside organization, sometimes in an innovative video format. There are links to internal ads – sometimes for subsidiaries of the parent company, as well as free downloads like mobile headlines and widgets. And finally, this is where you would “send, share, see your stories” via iReport.

• **Organization**
The site organization is laid out logically. The most important items are placed at the top, such as the logo and the feature story; wider columns are given to feature stories. This implies the importance of the story, and whether it is considered a “hard” or important new item. A list of topics is located at the top in the navigation bar, as well as a site search box. Ads are situated beneath the feature stories, so as to denote lesser importance.

• **Use of White Space**
There is liberal use of white space on the home page. This allows the reader to better determine the organization of the page. Space is found between the borders and tables, as well as inside the tables. Only a few stories are featured in the tables, and only a lead paragraph of text appears for each story; the remaining stories can be found by clicking links. Some tables consist mostly of links, which are surrounded by white space.
• **Brevity**
  The site may fill 60-70% of the homepage with print or graphics, and the remainder is devoted to white space. This assists the reader in quickly finding headings and links, so they can scan the material and move on.

  The average length of each node is brief. The postings are usually less than one page in length; sometimes as short as three paragraphs. Stories are kept fairly short.

**Interactivity in National News Sites**
Interactivity creates excitement on the CNN home page, a fact denoted by the red headlines associated with the interactive media. Variety in media adds interest to the site and breaks monotony. Such features include a link to CNN live, an RSS feed, breaking news video links, a “quick vote” poll, and the iReport (an opportunity for viewers to submit their own videos). At the bottom of the page are also links to CNN Radio, CNN Mobile and CNN Shop.

**Use of Visuals**
The use of visuals is essential to a website. Plenty of photos and graphics break up the page so reading the site becomes less tedious. Often the photo is as large as the story it illustrates. It adds color and interest, inviting the user to stay longer on the site investigating video. Video of news stories is important enough to warrant offering a choice of three featured videos at the top right of the page.

Video is also worth a thousand words. Take for instance, the recent video on CNN of Joran Van Der Sloot confessing to the murder of Natalee Holloway in Aruba. Viewing still photos of a confession cannot convey the same information as the opportunity observe a confession on video.

For advertisers, videos are very attractive. They provide movement, which catches the viewer’s attention. CNN provided two interesting techniques for advertisements. In an echo technique, the video ad may appear on the middle right of the page, while a still shot of the same product appears in the lower left, echoing the message.

Also, an ad is imbedded at the beginning of each news video, so that the ad begins rolling before the video has a chance start. (What appears to be the opportunity to choose a video from the home page is somewhat of a ruse; the video clicked will not automatically play, even after the commercial airs. The viewer needs to choose a target video again from the new window after the commercial begins.)

**Level of Formality**
The CNN site offers both formal and less formal content. To the left of the site, stories are more formal. The level of fact-checking rigor is expected to be impeccable, based on the accomplishments of CNN as a news organization, and the reputation of the wire service it uses. Writers are expected to use grammar without error. Facts are expected to be checked before published.

To the right, content is lighter, and more fun. There is more visual content, and less stress on fact checking.
Range of Variation in National News Sites

In general, the structure of national news sites is similar, but there are variances. This comparison includes CNBC.com, MSNBC.com, and nytimes.com (the New York Times). These sites divide the page into columns, as is common in a newspaper or magazine.

The logo is usually situated on the top left, although the New York Times centers its name in the header. Often the logos are initialisms that stand alone, without benefit of definition. For example, there is no mention that CNN is the shortened form of Cable News Network. This is the same for CNBC and MSNBC. Especially on the web, less is more. Being household names, the origins of the branding initialisms appear understood or unnecessary to readers.

The “lead story” is usually found to the left of the center. Several links to related stories are listed beneath the lead story. Sometimes the left column is wider than the right column, which denotes the importance of information found in the left column. Although at CNN.com secondary featured story pages are often one page in length, other sites feature lengthier stories.

In the right column one might find advertisements, either in the form of a photograph or a video. The right column might also contain links to “softer” news, such as entertainment or travel stories. In addition, national news sites offer a choice of video offerings.

Navigation buttons make it easy for users to quickly find topics they prefer to monitor. A glance at the buttons indicates something about the target audience, which ranges from people tracking basketball scores to movie buffs, to part-time job hunters.

The use of graphics, video and white space are similar between sites. White space is important in holding the interest of the reader, and in assisting the viewer in defining the organization of the site.

Visit the CNN.com Parody

As a tribute to CNN.com, see the accompanying CNN.com parody site, “TINCan.com” on my WRAC 210 Project Page.

Forecasting your own experience with genres

I have had some insights into the structure of news websites, should I have the opportunity to be involved in their construction in the future. In reviewing this genre, it is apparent that stories need to be kept brief on a home page.

The usage of white space should be generous. Visual interest is important. Employ visuals, and in a variety of forms: photos, videos, cartoons. Include interactive nodes if possible, such as polls and submissions from users. It is also important to offer a site search box. Keep informed about emerging technologies that might be relevant to audience access.

This construction might be applied to other organization to provide a polished and serious feel, professional but with the capacity to enhance the site with lighter content.