

## WINNING ESSAY OF AARHUS SYMPOSIUM CHALLENGE 2016

# THE INFLUENCE OF DIGITALISATION

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I'll always remember sitting there in the back of my dad's station wagon when we drove past that empty New York Times warehouse, almost brand new, yet nearly abandoned on the side of the New Jersey Turnpike. It was a slate gray concrete monolith, built for a time when people actually used to read newspapers. Recently the warehouse traded hands from the New York Times to an Arizona tech company.<sup>1</sup> And today, they're in the middle of building an online data processing center inside the bones of what used to be a newspaper distribution hub. The whole thing is almost cruelly ironic. And yet, it isn't really that surprising.

The New York Times has seen consistently decreasing revenues over the last decade, and posted a \$14 million net loss in the first quarter of 2016 alone.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the only recent growth for the company has come from investment in online content and revenue from online subscriptions. The people who run newspapers aren't stupid. They know they'll have to adapt to our changing online world if they want to survive. But so far, all the Times has done is shift their old model to a shiny online platform. And that's just not enough.

What's made the New York Times such a recognizable brand is that for most of its history you more or less had to buy a subscription to a big name paper. Otherwise you'd be left out of the loop. And so, in that way, newspapers like the Times became something our lives depended on: metaphorical "tent poles" that held together society, brought people together, framed conversations, and defined our joint understanding of the world. But we don't live in our living rooms anymore, sitting silently, reading editorials and current events columns. Today we live online. And as such, sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have become our new "tent poles". They draw in millions of users, telling us millions of intimate stories. And so, just as the newspapers of the twentieth century defined the way that people viewed their world, so too have websites begun to define our own.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.datacenterknowledge.com/archives/2011/03/23/io-data-centers-opens-massive-nj-site/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/business/media/new-york-times-co-q1-earnings.html>

We live in an online landscape with literally thousands of content providers, and in this storm of content the New York Times is just another voice shouting into the wind. It's losing out to those "tent pole" sites - thick with content - where modern people really live. The average New York Times reader will visit their site just under seven times a month, and spend about five minutes there each time they go. Facebook users visit over ninety times a month. That's more than three times a day, with the average visit lasting close to twenty minutes.<sup>3</sup> And yet, in spite of these new "tent pole" sites, people keep reading the New York Times. It's hemorrhaging money, but the company still commands a huge readership. After all, they do have the 120<sup>th</sup> most popular site in the world - poor retention metrics be damned. What this shows is that, cliché as it sounds, the news never gets old. People need it. And yet, the simple fact of the matter is that the sheer depth of information available on sites like Facebook and YouTube make it almost impossible for old fashioned content providers to maintain a fickle modern audience. That's why the solution to the problem of the modern newspaper isn't more advertising, or "multimedia integration". In order to become relevant again, the New York Times will have to become a "tent pole" site of its own. Hosting wide ranging content from various perspectives, and from different creators across the web. They're going to have to become Facebook for the News.

That might sound ridiculous, but it's not. This entire problem boils down to the fact that the greatest media challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that we just have too much content. And as such, no one knows where to look for it. Now, with it's well established distribution networks, international credibility, and large resource pool, the New York Times can start to buy up and curate quality journalistic content from across the internet: all under one roof. They have an opportunity to start making order from the chaos. To prune the infinite weeds of the internet, and find the rare fruit. If they can do it, point the eyes of the world their way and keep those eyes glued in place, transfixed by a depth of content that no one company could create - a depth that would have to be farmed from the the width of the online world itself. If the New York Times could do it, prove that the grand goings on of humanity still inspire us, then they might just find their place again as a tent pole. Holding up and holding together the fabric of our world once more.

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<sup>3</sup> alexa.com