




Competitive Analysis of Three Local Online News Sources

	The Capital/ HometownAnnapolis.com	The Columbia Flier	The Urbanite
Publisher	Capital-Gazette Newspapers	Times Mirror Company/ Patuxent Publishing Corp.	Tracy Durkin, Publisher
Homepage screenshot			
URL	http://www.hometownannapolis.com	http://news.mywebpal.com/index.cfm?pnpid=658	http://www.urbanitebaltimore.com/

Introduction

The websites of three local news sources were chosen to highlight the state of the Baltimore/Washington online newspaper market for the purpose of a strategic development of a new online presence for *Greenbelt News Review*.

These three are the Annapolis edition of the Capital-Gazette, called "*HometownAnnapolis.com*", Patuxent Publishing's *The Columbia Flier*, and Baltimore's *Urbanite*. Twenty-seven points of comparison have been organized into four categories: Organization, Advertising, Interactivity, Accessibility.

The Capital was chosen in part because of its proximity to Greenbelt. *The Columbia Flier* was chosen in part because of its relative size to the *Greenbelt News Review*'s current circulation and potential online audience, as well as its proximity. *The Urbanite* was chosen because of its community focus and strength in online design.

It must be noted that each of these three news sources has a larger circulation than *Greenbelt News Review*, however, the goal of the competitive analysis is to show differences in how organizations with similar sizes, locations, and missions use the Web to serve similar audiences.

Section 1. Organization

	<i>The Capital</i>	<i>Columbia Flier</i>	<i>Urbanite</i>
Primary/Secondary Navigation	Primary navigation on the left and secondary navigation across the top of every page.	Primary navigation on the left of every page.	Primary navigation across the top of all pages and secondary navigation on the left of all pages, except the home page.
Navigation Architecture	Naming of links is straightforward. Some link names appear multiple times within the navigation and some differently named links go to the same page. Specialized links appear on certain pages.	Naming of links is straightforward. Misspellings and other inconsistencies apparent in naming of links.	Naming of links for primary navigation is straightforward. Naming of links for secondary navigation is less intuitive. Specialized links appear on certain pages.
Color	Color does not effectively add to the organization of the site. The content is mostly black text on a white background.	Color does not effectively add to the organization of the site. The content is mostly black text on a white background.	Color successfully breaks up sections of the page. The content is mostly black text on a white background.
Site Map	Yes.	No.	No.

Analysis of the organization of these sites is based on the existence of primary and secondary navigation, the architecture of the navigation, the use of color throughout the site and the presence of a site map.

The *Columbia Flier* has the most successful solution for navigation. Its primary navigation is on the left side of each page that includes 15 items that when rolled over display additional options. *The Capital* has over 80 links in its primary navigation on the left side of each page. Certain categories need to be clicked on to open and reveal more options, but this is not intuitive. The secondary navigation across the top of all pages includes six links, which are possibly the most viewed categories. Both of these publications have a straightforward naming convention for links (e.g., News). The *Urbanite* has primary navigation across the top of each page and the ten links have intuitive names (e.g., Things to Do). On the left side of each page, except the home page, is secondary navigation that changes to reflect the section the user is in. Link names in the secondary navigation are less instinctive.

The Capital is the only site to have a site map. It is easy to find because it is the last link in the primary navigation. However, its effectiveness comes into question because of its lack of main categories that are present in the primary and secondary navigation.

Of the three sites, color is used most effectively on the *Urbanite*. Color successfully breaks up sections of the page and provides a frame that calls attention to the content. Color is used minimally and with little success on *The Capital* and *Columbia Flier* sites.

As can be learned from *The Capital*, a site map is not a substitute for a good navigation strategy. Instead, it is advised that the *Greenbelt News Review* go with a simple and persistent primary navigation as seen on the *Columbia Flier*. Combined with the straightforward naming of links, the *Greenbelt News Review* would be easy to navigate, without the added development of a site map. In addition, the *Greenbelt News Review* should consider following in the footsteps of the *Urbanite* and use color to help organize the site and highlight the content.

Section 2. Advertisements

	<i>The Capital</i>	<i>Columbia Flier</i>	<i>Urbanite</i>
Placement/Quantity/Cycling	3 locations: 1 header banner ad (optionally), 1 featured ad inline with content, multiple ads stacked in right margin. Page reloads cycle.	2 locations: 1 body banner ad and multiple ads stacked in right margin. Page reloads cycle and reorder.	Two columns of ads appear on all pages, except the home page, and occupy the same amount of space as the content of the site.
Clickability	All ads are clickable.	All ads are clickable.	All ads are clickable.
Obtrusive/Unpleasant	On some stories a banner ad appears in the header above the title of the website, possibly for no reason. Ads seem appropriate to website's brand, and most are local.	Most ads seem to be unrelated to the content or branding of the site (or accurately reflect the unbranded/weakly-branded character of the site).	Ad placement outside of the content area, as well as uniform size, and clean design that complements the branding of the site help to make the ads feel like a positive part of the content.
Computer-generated/Placed	Google ads seem to be placed by keyword, featuring "Annapolis MD Homes" for example, and appear together in a group.	Google ads seem to be placed by keyword, featuring "Columbia Apartments" for example, and appear together in a group.	The same ads appear on each page in the same order.
Rates/Rate Structure	Rate structure split between paper and online. Online ad pricing completely tuned to online medium, and explain key concepts well to advertisers. Priced by ranged pixel dimensions by month: 150 x 75px x 1Mo. = \$400; 150 x 600px x 12Mo. = \$7560	The Columbia Flier doesn't seem to price ads specifically to the website. The print open ad rates (no repetition) range from \$167 for 1 column x 1.75 inches to \$2,861 for 5 columns x 11.5 inches (basically whole page).	Rates only appear for the print version of the paper. Print ad prices range from \$230 to \$7,715.
Advertiser-paper Relationship	Featured prominently in advertiser-specific published information. (See below).	Featured prominently in advertiser-specific published information. (See below).	Featured prominently in advertiser-specific published information. (See below).
Circulation	Website claims 24,000 site visitors per day, separating circulation stats for the online and traditional papers for the benefit of online advertisers.	39,469	150,000

It is sometimes said that the primary business relationship for a newspaper is its relationship with advertisers rather than with readers. The points of comparison featured here are designed to give insight into that relationship.

Ads appear in different locations across the three news sources. *The Capital* seems to be the most mature layout, with ads placed within the content to make them more likely to be seen by the audience. The most effective ad placement (and presumably most expensive) is the feature ad which puts the ad inline with content near the top of every story. This is an option that only *The Capital* makes use of.

The issue of appropriateness of ads and the degree to which they "feel right" in their placement and relationship with content is an important one to focus on for any news source. *The Urbanite* seems uncomfortable with their ads because they awkwardly hide them on the right hand side of the page in two persistent, static columns. By comparison, *The Capital* foregrounds their ads in a variety of ways including dynamic placement and cycling. They also seem to have the most unique ads of any of the three news sources. And, by keeping them off the home page, and by strategically placing them "below-the-fold", they manage to integrate Google Ads into their content without cheapening their brand with the computer-generated/computer-placed ads that Google serves.

The ad rate structure, rates, and marketing materials tell a clear story about how the three news sources view their relationship with advertisers. *The Columbia Flier* deserves mention for its copious marketing materials that effectively share useful facts about their readership to advertisers. However, *The Capital* stands out as the only news source of the three that has separate rates for online ads. They also do the best job communicating with would-be advertisers about the nature of the medium, using pixels to describe ad sizes and creating web graphics that illustrate the shape and appearance of an online ad.

Our advice for the advertising category leans toward the approach taken by *The Capital*. Clearly, their dominance is a landslide effect: they have the greatest online readership, the most unique ads, the best online business model, the best integration of ads into their content, and perhaps most-importantly they are proud of their advertiser relationship. Their readers likely expect and perhaps even want ad content with their online news content.

Section 3. Interactivity

	<i>The Capital</i>	<i>Columbia Flier</i>	<i>Urbanite</i>
Comment on Story	Allows user to comment on stories but not on other user's comments.	No.	No commenting on the same page as the story; however, at end of story is a link to comment on it in the "Chat" section, an online forum.
Print Button	Yes.	No.	Yes, but not on all pages.
Forward/Share	Users can follow link to share stories on Facebook.	Yes, but only in "Opinion" section.	Yes, "Send to a friend" email form.
Email Marketing	No email push version.	No email push version.	Yes, opt-in "email list" forwards branded content to email biweekly.
Slide show	Multimedia section has picture slide shows of the different topics.	No.	Feature articles include photo slide shows built in Flash and are activated by user.
Forum	Yes.	No.	In "Chat" interactive forum users can post new comments or respond to comments from others. Comments must be related to moderated categories.
Google Bookmark	Yes.	No.	No.
Blogs	Provides staff and community blogs; however, there is no opportunity to create or comment on blogs.	No.	No.
Letters to Editor	Yes.	Yes.	No.
Feedback	Yes.	No.	No.
Form Automation	Yes.	Yes.	Yes.
Search	Yes.	Searches a deep archive of stories, title and story contents for keyword. Search returns implicitly ranked search results that are based on count of key word.	Powered by Google. Default is to search the <i>Urbanite</i> , but after initial search, user has option to search the Web. Current and past columns are searched by title and story content for keyword.

Although interactivity is a widely discussed topic, there is little consensus about what interactivity really means, what it has to offer to readers or how publishers can best use it in online communications. The initial interactive features on the Web were online forums, email integration, and forms development. Overtime, online communication has evolved, most recently into tiny channels of communication with ubiquitous chat (now called "text messaging"). Online forums which were once the gold-standard of interactivity have fallen out of favor because they tended to thrive only in an environment of constant administration (moderation) or within disciplined communities with limited access by the public.

The comparison of these three news sources reveals a myriad of business decisions, strategies, and nuanced technical capacities. *The Capital* seems to make the most of the latest generation of Web communication services that provide content managers the opportunity to leverage their position by adding value through integration with other services. The *Columbia Flier* may in fact be trying to do the same thing by linking to interactive features with other business partners, but since they require registration and lead off-site they cannot really be described as features of their product or brand.

The *Urbanite* is probably the most effective at its integration of interactive content and features, including foregrounded slide shows, and a large scale effort at a forum for their readers available on every page (but which is confusingly titled "Chat").

Regrettably, none of the three sites appear to gain any significant advantage through their investments in interactive media. The take-away here is that interactivity is an expensive proposition to develop, and ultimately has to match an appetite by the readers to benefit the publisher.

Section 4. Accessibility

	<i>The Capital</i>	<i>Columbia Flier</i>	<i>Urbanite</i>
Do You Need to Register?	Users required to register to view archived articles, post comments, send feedback, or post on online forum.	Users required to register to gain access to Weather Center, National Headlines, Today's News (email push), Printable Coupons, MyMoviePal, MyMusicPal, MyBookPal, MyGoalPal, Contests, Updates on Site Changes and Enhancements.	Users must register to post to the forum ("Chat") or make purchases in the Boutique.
Archives	Yes, in primary navigation.	Yes, through "Search" on every page, and in "News: Archived News Stories".	Yes, "Past Issues" at very bottom of every page.
Accessibility (Disability)	JavaScript menus are a bad choice for accessibility.	JavaScript menus are a bad choice for accessibility.	Reliance on Flash makes this the least accessible site; limited or no usability for screen readers.
Computer/Automated Search Optimization	JavaScript menus are a bad choice for search engine optimization.	JavaScript menus are a bad choice for search engine optimization. However, Google search results return results to site's content, including unbroken links to archive stories. RSS link at the bottom of every story.	Reliance on Flash makes this the least accessible site to search engines.

User registration is the first step to the development of customized ad content and offers publishers valuable information on how to sell readers to their advertisers. For this reason, online newspapers have persisted in the struggle to entice readers to reveal their identity to them, despite the fact that this "two-way mirror" effect of internet media is probably the single greatest difference between paper and online publishing. Each of the three sites has embarked on a quest to register their users, and it is likely that all three of them study their users' data for insights into strategic decisions of various kinds.

The question of how to encourage user registration is a challenge that each of these news sources has faced and answered differently. The approaches used by The Urbanite and Capital is more subdued and seems to be based on offering native content
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which often makes sense to require identifying the user (for example, posting in a forum, or making a purchase). The *Columbia Flier* has taken a more aggressive approach toward registration, and seems to be trying to develop content whose sole purpose is to get the user to register (Weather Center, National Headlines, Contests, and Updates on Site Changes and Enhancements).

The evaluation of a website's accessibility is important for two reasons. The first is obviously that features of a website design that needlessly limit who can use it are bad, as well as being a civil rights issue. But additionally, web publishers have learned that good accessibility for disabled users almost always coincides with superior usability for all users.

Unfortunately, all three of these news sources have numerous accessibility problems. The *Urbanite* suffers the greatest problems, due to their dependence on Flash throughout their site. The choice of a home page primary navigation in Flash is one where style is definitely gained at the expense of accessibility and usability. Luckily, HTML navigation picks up in secondary pages, although it is hard to imagine a blind user navigating to them. The use of small text and links which do not stand out from content in the *Urbanite* make accessibility difficult for older and vision impaired users of the site. Additionally, not all text within the *Urbanite* can be increased in size.

The use of JavaScript driven menus with *The Capital* and *Columbia Flier* is not a good choice from an accessibility or search engine optimization standpoint. And, increasing text size renders the *Columbia Flier's* navigation unreadable. The use of ALT tags on images is inconsistent among *The Capital* and *Columbia Flier*. Not all images include a tag. All images on the *Urbanite*, including the global navigation links, publication logo and photo slide shows, lack the use of ALT tags altogether. This inconsistency and lack of tags makes it impossible for screen readers to convey these items to the user reading the site with assistive technology. Finally, the use of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) for printing and alternative media (like cell phones, PDAs, etc.) is weak or non-existent among all these sites.

A site's accessibility to other computers is also important to its success. Today, most users find the content they seek on the internet using search engines, and others use RSS syndicated news feeds. Of the three sites, the *Urbanite's* reliance on Flash and other multimedia makes it the weakest news source on this point of comparison. The accessibility of *The Capital* and *Columbia Flier* is diminished by each newspaper's use of JavaScript menus.