

## What time does the Super Bowl start? Or, internet journalism after content farms

*Donald Mahoney*

On February 6, 2011, the *Huffington Post* published what has become one of the most infamous and emblematic stories of the internet journalism age. The story concerned the starting time of Super Bowl XLV. Its headline was: “What Time Does The Super Bowl Start?” and it still owns the top Google ranking for the query.

Consider this overly obvious, if oddly formal intro sentence: “Super Bowl 2011 takes place on Sunday, Feb. 6, 2011, at 6:30 p.m. Eastern Time and 3:30 p.m. Pacific Time.”

The sentence defies the perception that news in the digital era must be as direct and succinct as possible: the year (2011) appears twice, the time zones are written out rather than abbreviated, and the gameday is included even though the previous forty-four Super Bowls have been played on a Sunday. The title of the story contains no information – only the exact search term most people are likely to

type into Google. The story continues with four more paragraphs of information unrelated to the Super Bowl kickoff time. This is “news” that doesn’t exist to be read. It was created as a lure to boost web traffic, which drives advertising revenue.

When I was introduced to journalism in fifth grade – or the age of ten – I was told the beginning of every news story must contain five *W*’s: who, what, where, when and why. It was a rudimentary but enduring lesson in reporting. But the internet radically altered the architecture of news reporting. More and more, an online news story must rank. This often means compromising the facts of reporting with the language of Google, a compromise that has consequences for the way readers perceive the world. The job of journalism has had to adapt. Algorithms are now as important as editors in determining what gets covered, while many of today’s online journalists – emboldened by laws like fair use in the US that state that news stories have a built-in copyright elasticity – gladly rewrite, or plagiarize, the reporting of others.

Recently, while reading a long essay in the *New York Review* about the strange and confusing uprising in Syria, I realized I knew next to nothing about the Arab Spring revolts. I felt pathetic. I consider myself to be relatively well-informed and intellectually curious. Here was the world’s largest social movement in a generation, a complicated event involving the interwoven heroic efforts of various peoples to shove off the yoke of tyranny taking place against the back-

drop of colonial meddling and geopolitical incompetence. But beyond some Robert Fisk and a hilarious photojournalism piece about improvised metal helmets worn by protestors in Tahrir Square, I had shrugged off nearly every opportunity over the last three months to educate myself in the extraordinary happenings taking place across north Africa and the Middle East. Perhaps my capacity for empathy is dwindling, but it seems to me that my general lack of interest in the world has accelerated in line with my growing dependence on the internet. Some might blame the physical act of internet news consumption for this rot – skim, click, skim, click, skim, click. I blame internet journalism itself.

James Agee wrote, in 1939, “The very blood and semen of journalism ... is a broad and successful form of lying. Remove that form of lying and you no longer have journalism.” In the last few years, that lying has been re-imagined through forms of reporting that are unique to the internet. These developments are in some ways related to the brief but impactful flourishing of content farms – a flourishing that was itself nothing more than a logical consequence of our desperate intimacy with a search engine.

Content farms are parasitic websites that produce stories on commonly searched topics, and often offer tawdry “how-to” guides or act as celebrity news storehouses. Farmed content only enters our lives because these websites know how to exploit Google’s reliance on links and keywords in fixing ranking. Their production line is

draconian: after programmers decipher the Google trends of the moment, poorly paid writers and videomakers convert the subject matter of those trends into stories over and over and over again. While there is now a content farm for nearly every niche of human interest, their reliance on stealth in production ensures that at a textual level, their stories are ill-written, blatantly reproduced, and uninformative. The decline in the standard of internet journalism mimics the gradual deterioration of an image that is photocopied again and again. But content farms do not simply exist to subvert the efficacy of the Google search: they made a considerable amount of money. Europe’s biggest content farm, Populis, which is based in Dublin, claims it made €58 million last year, while on January 26, 2011, Demand Media, the breadbasket of farmed content and owner of sites like eHow and Livestrong, became a publically traded company after an IPO of \$1.5 billion, which made it just about as valuable as the *New York Times*.

This parallel with the *New York Times* is not accidental; in this brave new world, the two are competitors. After content farms, there is no difference between a report from a battle in Benghazi and an article on how to make the perfect mojito. Both exist in a cyberspatial state as content. In this market, content’s inherent worth is determined by its lasting value. Reportage from Benghazi might have an intense immediate value, but news fatigue is endemic and a new global crisis will inevitably shift collective attention to another hard-

to-pronounce place. The search for the perfect mojito will go on and on.

On February 24, 2011, less than a month after the *Huffington Post's* Super Bowl story, Google enacted its Panda update and went to war on content farms. Panda was little more than a tweak to the sacrosanct algorithm that Google employs to determine webpage ranking, but its impact has been radical. Since its introduction, legitimate news entities have gained visitors while content farms have been marginalized. Demand Media, which always denied that it is a content farm, has suffered a 40 percent traffic drop since Panda was introduced, which led to a simultaneous erosion of its share price.

But while content farms like Chacha and Squidoo have been thrust into Google's ghetto, their philosophy has been already embraced by online news producers seeking to profit from digital journalism. By subjecting itself to the language of search, online journalism has taken on a dumb, deadening quality that to me, at least, corrodes even "quality" reporting that appears online.

A scroll along the sidebar of the *Huffington Post's* Super Bowl story shows the range of popular news covered on a typical day (the day in this case being May 7, 2011): a story featuring photos of a pregnant Kate Hudson in high heels, a story featuring photos of Kim Kardashian in a bikini, a story about a new Osama Bin Laden video, a story about a pro cyclist who was killed in a race in Italy, a story about being a "Tiger woman" (which I learned means being Chinese-

American), and a story entitled "10 Surprising Signs You're Dating An Abusive Guy." Intrigued, I followed the last link:

You'd have to be crazy to hook up with an abuser, right? That's what I thought, but after working on our relationship violence story for six months, I was shocked by how smart and cool the women who get fooled are. The thing is, these guys are super charmers, pulling off Oscar-worthy performances of Mr. Dream Dude – at least while they're wooing you. And then, when they've got you madly in love with them, *ka-bang*, their violent true colors start showing.

The good news: there are definite danger sings a guy is an abuser before he ever raises a fist – and they start with you just having a funny feeling in your pit of your stomach.

These are the introductory paragraphs to a story by a woman named Liz Brody. The conversational tone ("Mr. Dream Dude," "*ka-bang*"), the illogical arguments ("cool" women are naturally susceptible to domestic abuse?), the poor grammar ("your pit of your stomach") and the spellcheck-defying typos ("danger sings") all make the story read like it was directly transcribed by an intern after a telephone conversation with the author. One imagines the author and intern chuckling through the task – of describing abusive men – as though they were sitting outside somewhere in the sunshine, drinking the perfect mojito.

Hot Trends, a website Google operates to reveal its most searched

terms in America, is one of the best places to track journalism's very near future. It ranks the top twenty search terms for every day, while including metrics that measure the frequency ("hotness") of the search term and its peak search time, as well as blog posts and news reports on the topic. While on Hot Trends on May 5, I stumbled onto a story that seemed to me to typify, almost perfectly, contemporary web journalism today. The story was on the Patch.com site for Marietta, Georgia, listed beside one of the day's leading search topics, "Cinco de Mayo." The story seemed custom-made to rank, but is, in terms of its value to anyone searching for news on Cinco de Mayo, just short of pointless. Patch.com employs an army of correspondents in towns across America to write local news, like this story by Holly Roberson, which appeared online at 6 a.m. [*Ed note: Hyperlinks embedded in the story appear below in bold*]:

1) Well, it's going to be a little warmer today, but not by much.

I enjoyed the cooler weather yesterday; I'm not ready for 98 degrees and 100 percent humidity.

But I digress.

Today will be sunny, with a high near 70. Tonight will be mostly clear, with a low around 46, according to the **National Weather Service**.

2) Today is **Cinco de Mayo**. And before your mouth starts watering at the thought of all the Mexican food you can eat, remember what the real celebration is all about.

Cinco de Mayo is a **Mexican holiday** on May 5 that commemorates the **Mexican army's** unlikely victory over **French** forces at the **Battle of Puebla** on May 5, 1862.

And then ... pass me the chips and salsa. **Here** are a few ideas for celebrating.

3) Today is also the **National Day of Prayer**, an annual day of observance held on the first Thursday of May. The day was designated by **Congress** in 1952 as a day when people are asked "to turn to **God in prayer and meditation**." There will be many special events in the community. Here's **one** I know of.

Contemporary web journalism is blandly, if forcibly, full of pointless trivia and drowning in stupid hyperlinks. The link, for instance, to "French" brings you to the Wikipedia page for France, while the link on "God" brings you to the Wikipedia entry for God. Are there really people in Marietta, Georgia, who require contextualization for these concepts? Either way, the abundance of terms associated with Cinco de Mayo (and links to pages that defined those terms, as well unrelated and irrelevant links that simply serve to enhance the story's interconnectedness with the web, in the hopes of improving its ranking) ensured that people from far beyond Marietta encountered the story.

I freelanced at the *Metro* in Dublin at the peak of the 2008 global financial crisis and wrote front-page economic stories every day,

though I did not have the slightest grasp of how a bond market operated or what a credit default swap was. I didn't bother schooling myself; I just found new ways to write what had already been written. In theory, at least, the internet's challenge to print journalism's economic model should make for a ruthlessly competitive market that values illuminating reporting over all things. In reality, this instant, human beings around the world who call themselves journalists are locked in front of their computer screens trying to invent new adjectives for Justin Bieber's hair.

This evolution in news writing has occurred within a general shift in the way news is consumed. Our connection to the morning ritual of newspaper reading is disappearing. Many newspapers have tried to launch e-papers – purchasable PDFs that look just like newspapers – and all have failed. We are turning away from trusted media websites as our first destination each morning for the essential news of the day. The endless volume of online news (and the gradual rise of pay walls) means that people rely on social media sites like Twitter, or even news curating sites like Storyful, to filter what we read. And for all the news that we are missing, there is search. That is why Twitter lists its trending topics: to activate the curiosity of users and get them searching for information on popular subjects. While many will still go directly to the likes of the BBC or the *New York Times* during some event of global interest, it is clear that people also use Google as tool for finding news. A scan of Hot Trends on May 2, the

day after Osama Bin Laden's death was announced, shows that people were actively searching for information on topics related to his killing. Ten of the twenty most popular search terms that day, things like "osama bin laden dead," "islamabad," "navy seals," "al Qaeda," "9/11," "president obama," "ground zero," "white house," "obama address," "twin towers" – all pertained to Bin Laden's death. (Remarkably, '80s pop star Rick Springfield cracked the top twenty).

My brother, who graduated magna cum laude from one of America's oldest universities in 2009, and who was news editor of the university's newspaper, decided to pursue a career in journalism. He said he wrote to every major newspaper and news website in America after graduation seeking work experience, but had little success. Eventually, he found work with *US News & World Report*, a once-respected American current events weekly magazine that only endures now because of its annual ranking of US universities. His specific job there made no sense at all to me when he'd explain it over email, beyond some vague connection to travel writing. I met him in Ireland last summer, where he described it in detail. *US News & World Report* was in the process of stockpiling travel reports for the world's popular tourist destinations. Rather than assign these stories to travel connoisseurs or foreign correspondents, they were employing young, educated Americans like my brother to write about holidays in Oslo or Machu Pichu from their office in Washington. Travel experience was not required: they'd base their reports on easily googled

information while focusing specifically on popular search terms that correspond to each place. They'd have about three days to produce each report. I must add that the venture was mostly folly. Type "Visit Oslo" into Google and you'll have to trawl through countless Google pages before reaching the *US News & World Report* story on the subject. I happen to write text optimized for search engines for my own job – a job which lacks any pretense of journalism – and my brother and I had a long talk that night about becoming accidental craftsmen of the internet's relatively new, lobotomized commercial language. My brother was in Ireland because he had just quit his job with *US News & World Report* after about a year. He would soon take a job cat-sitting in Madrid.

Legendary New York reporter Jimmy Breslin was asked recently to explain the collapse of newspapers. He responded, "How do you compete with the air?" I was en route to a party in Sodermalm, a gentrified island in Stockholm, where I now live, and encountered a massive natural rock formation that was part of a city park along Renstiernas Gata. As we walked by it, I could see that offices had been built into the rock. I approached and through the windows of a large door, I could see a driveway that led down into the ground. Huge white clouds plumed out of the rock from a vent. It looked like a Bond villain's hideaway, but people at the party claimed that the Pirate Bay and the Wikileaks computer servers were once stored deep inside those rocks. They possibly still were. The smoke con-

tinued to billow out of the rocks when we left the party around four in the morning. For the first time that night, I could visualize that constantly growing mass of information in cyberspace. An ethereal steam pumped skywards day and night, the odorless residue of our ceaseless curiosity and tedium.

*Donald Mahoney lives in Stockholm*