

Content Critical

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Chapter 1

Everything you know about publishing is wrong

"The Internet will make every enterprise a publisher."

Steve Case, chairman and CEO of America Online, 2000

"The difficulty seems to be, not so much that we publish unduly in view of the extent and variety of present-day interests, but rather that publication has been extended far beyond our present ability to make real use of the record. The summation of human experience is being expanded at a prodigious rate, and the means we use for threading through the consequent maze to the momentarily important item is the same as was used in the days of square-rigged ships."

Vannevar Bush, "As we may think", *Atlantic Monthly*, 1945

"The concept of the web is of universal readership. If you publish a document on the web, it is important that anyone who has access to it can read it and link to it."

Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, 1991

The secret of web success

You want to know the secret of a successful website? You want to know the Holy Grail of the Web? Sure you do. That's why you picked up this book.

There are two facts about the Web that are vastly under-appreciated. The first is that the primary thing people do on the Web is read. That's why this book calls people who visit the Web 'readers' instead of that ugly, generic, drug-associated, catch-all, mean-nothing term, 'users'.

The second fact is that readers come to the web to *gather* content. Think about it for a moment. Readers come to the Web to gather or review content, rather than specifically to search or find content. The difference is subtle, but it's critical.

It's like this. Most of the time the reader (customer, staff, supplier, investor) doesn't know exactly what content they are looking for. They're interested in a particular subject area, product type, or other general area of interest. Only in a minority of cases does the reader know precisely what content they want.

The traditional approach of data/content management deals reasonably well with readers who know the exact name of the document they are looking for. But it deals very poorly with readers who have a general idea of what they want. In other words, the approach to dealing with content that most organizations take today fails most of its readers most of the time. The result we see everywhere. It's called information overload.

What's the solution? What's the secret that will make your website succeed where so many others fail? The secret can be summarized in one word:

PUBLISHING.

The Web is a medium for publishing content. What? Surely publishing is about Harry Potter and *The Wall Street Journal*. It's about James Joyce and *Sports Illustrated*. Wrong. If part of your job involves writing original content, whether that be a technical paper for a product, or a marketing pitch for that product, you're part of a publishing process. If you find that you're spending increasing time reading stuff in order to help you do your job better, you're directly affected by publishing. The modern world runs on content. We're either publishers or consumers of it. Mostly, we're both.

If you work for an organization and part of your job is to write for that organization you should read this book. If part of your job is to edit the written work of others and then publish that work on an intranet or Internet website, then you should read this book. If your job is to help your organization create, edit and publish content more efficiently, then you should read this book. If you do any of the above, then whether you knew it or not, you're involved in publishing.

Content is written-down intellectual capital. It is the lifeblood of the information organization and the publishing processes and systems are its heart and arteries. The organization that doesn't understand how to publish content professionally will play a diminishing role in an increasingly information-driven economy. In a world dominated by information, publishing skills are no longer something that's nice to have. They are a must have.

As a recent A.T Kearney study put it, "digital content is becoming key to a company's ability to develop and expand commerce, foster collaboration within and between organizations, personalize sales and customer service, and disseminate information both internally and externally." Content is critical.

It's an information overloaded world

Welcome to information overload. Get used to it, because it's going to get a lot worse. In an Industrial Economy we face issues of scarcity. Oil is scarce, prices go up. In a digital economy, we face issues of glut. Things digital have a close-to-zero cost to reproduce, therefore they get endlessly reproduced.

Consider the following:

- ❑ Every issue of the New York Times contains more information than a 17th century individual would have read in a lifetime.
- ❑ There is enough scientific information written every year to keep a person busy reading day and night for 460 years
- ❑ In the last 30 years we have produced more information than in the previous 5,000
- ❑ The amount of recorded scientific knowledge is doubling approximately every fifteen to twenty years
- ❑ Over 1,000 books are published around the world every day
- ❑ Every day there are 7 million new documents published on the Web, where there are already over 550 billion.
- ❑ The world produces between one and two exabytes of unique content per year, which is roughly 250 megabytes for every man, woman, and child on earth.

The Web is the Trojan Horse of information overload. It promised information nirvana and delivered overload hell. Someone once said that searching for information on the Web was like drinking water from a fire hose. Not surprisingly, a 2000 survey by Roper

Starch Worldwide found that 71% of people using the Internet get frustrated when searching.

Traditional publishing sucks

Walk into a newsagent and be stunned by the amount of magazines and newspapers on offer. There used to be an ad for a 'serious' newspaper that said, miss reading this paper and you miss an important part of the day. The joke that went around was that if you fully read this particular paper you would miss the *entire* day. Walk into a bookstore and be overawed by the massive selection of books available. Remember, even the biggest bookstore in the world can only display a tiny fraction of the books currently in print.

Traditional publishing sucks. Publishing is the art and science of moving content from the creator (author) to the consumer (reader). But it doesn't work very well. It's haphazard, slow, and wildly inefficient. Who are the publishers and editors who decide what gets published when? What do they know? Aren't they overpaid middlemen who always miss the really good stuff? Why should we trust their judgment? Why should we wait for their opinion on what we should and shouldn't read?

And why is it that so many books and magazines are published? Think of the 1,000-plus books published around the world every day. Can you believe that? If you read two books every week, you would only be reading three ten-thousandths of what's published. And even if you had time to read more books, how would you even find out which were worth reading? In the US alone, nearly 5,000 different magazines are published. Of all copies printed, more than half are returned to the publishers unsold.

The whole publishing industry charges too much for its services as well. Libraries around the world, particularly those attached to universities, are in crisis. Prices for academic journals have spiraled out of control. The very content that is the fuel that universities run on is simply getting too expensive.

There has to be an alternative, right?

The alternative sucks 30,000 times more

The alternative is 30,000 times more frightening. So, you think there are too many magazines, newspapers and books in print. Consider this carefully. According to a 2000 study by the University of California, Berkeley, printed content represents 0.003 percent of all content published annually in the world. That statistic is worth repeating:

Printed content represents 0.003 percent of all content published annually in the world.

Think about all those bookstores. Think about all those books, magazines and newspapers. All that massive, massive quantity of print still only represents 0.003 of total content.

Where the hell is all the rest of it published? The vast majority of content in the world can be found on computer disks. In comparison to computers, print publishing is a miser. Print is simply not at the races. You see, the real problem we face today is not what is being published in print, it's what is being 'published' to disk.

For every sentence published in print there are 30,000 sentences published on computers. For every book printed there are some 30,000 'books' published on computers. Traditional publishing may not be working when it comes to print, but at least it has made some effort to keep the floodgates shut. That's because the average publisher will reject up to 90 percent of publishing proposals they get.

In the world of computers, the floodgates have been blown from their hinges. Information has gone haywire on computers because there are little or no publishing standards. Everyone is a publisher, most of it is awful, and nobody has time to read anywhere remotely near what's out there. Even if they want to read a specific document, there's so much content, so badly organized, that the effort in finding it is often not worth the trouble. As Neil Postman puts it, "We have transformed information into a form of garbage."

Yet, people are reading more because they have to. People are writing more because they have to. Content is critical to the success of the modern organization and individual. Publishing may suck, but its alternative is far, far worse. No matter what way you slice it, getting better at publishing is the only way you're going to get better at content.

The essence of publishing is communication. The essence of great publishing is about getting the right content to the right person at the right time – and making a profit out of it. Increasingly, that's what modern business is about, whether that content is going to a member of corporate staff, a supplier, a customer or investor, whether that content is helping to sell a product or support it.

Organizations are awful at publishing content

Imagine for a moment the modern factory floor. Everything is clean and tidy. The machines are well organized. The processes work with great precision. Efficiency and productivity are maximized. A good manager will not allow a thing to get out of place.

Try and imagine what the contents of your computer or website would look like if they were presented like a factory floor. If they are like a great many other websites, they'd look less like a factory floor and more like a local dump--an information dump.

A modern manager would never let their factory floor get in the state they let their websites get into. One reason is that you cannot 'see' the state content is in. Another is that few people realize the true value or cost of content. Studies have shown that a quality document can cost \$4,000 to get ready for publication. Think about it. That report on your desk probably cost more than the computer sitting beside it.

A great many managers think about content as being 'stored' rather than 'published' on computers. "The old dynamic of computing belongs to the golden age of information," Richard Hackathorn wrote in Byte Magazine in 1997. "It was the classical 'Request and Reply' (R&R) model." This indeed is the classic approach to information. The computer stores the content, and then the reader requests a specific document.

This model worked okay when there was a reasonable quantity of content and when the person knew exactly what they were looking for. The problem is that the amount of content has ballooned and that in the great majority of cases, the reader often isn't quite sure exactly what they want. Thus, the old model of how we deal with content on

computers is not working. Organizations need a totally new approach; a publishing approach.

Everything you know about the Web is wrong

The Web is not the lost city of the geeks. It is not there so that the techies can take over the world. The Web is not 'cutting edge' technology, but rather primitive technology. There is no such thing as a 'webmaster'. An Internet month is not like a normal year, because while there are now far more websites and people reading them, the underlying structures of the Web have not really changed in the last 5 years. Broadband is not a reality for the average consumer. Interactive TV is still a pipe dream. Virtual reality is still science fiction.

The Internet was invented as a communications medium and the Web was invented as a publishing solution for content. As Publish Magazine stated in October 2000, "We stand on the threshold of a revolution. The increasing demand for businesses to reach the customer and each other has brought the world to another upheaval—an Internet communication revolution."

"Strip away the highfalutin talk, and at bottom, the Internet is a tool that dramatically lowers the cost of communication," Business Week wrote in March 2001. When America Online chairman Steve Case talked at the JP Morgan annual technology conference in May 2001, he stated that, "the key driver" over the coming decade are products and services "that really do give consumers better ways to get information or to communicate or to be entertained."

So, in essence, the Web is fundamentally a place where people come to publish and find content. The primary activity that a person does on a website is read. What's more, the Web is going to remain a publishing medium for text-based content (with simple graphics) for the next 20 years at least. Broadband, streaming video, virtual reality data suits, you name it, in time will all find a place in the great big Web. But in 2020, millions upon millions of people will still have everyday needs to read up on something, to learn more about something so that they can buy it, sell it or make it.

Tim Berners Lee invented the World Wide Web because he realized that the traditional tools of publishing were not working. In the late Eighties, there was a problem at the CERN Research Institute where he worked. It was a classic problem of the new economy: Getting the right information to the right people at the right time.

At CERN this problem was being addressed by the classic human network approach. If you wanted something you talked to somebody else in a corridor, in a canteen, on the phone, by email. That person scratched their head and said maybe that John knows where that research paper is, or maybe Mary has it on her computer, or give me a call later and I'll have a root around in my office, or did you check the filing cabinet in Office 5A?

This classic approach worked great in a situation where everybody knew everybody else, where things changed at a sensible pace, and where there was a reasonable quantity of content being created. It did not work in a new economy whose principle characteristics were the speed of change and the massive increase in the amount of content being created.

As a research institute, with lots of visiting researchers, CERN faced another key problem; a high turnover of people. “When two years is a typical length of stay, information is constantly being lost,” Berners Lee pointed out in his original proposal for the Web in 1990. “If a CERN experiment was a static once-only development, all the information could be written in a big book. As it is, CERN is constantly changing as new ideas are produced, as new technology becomes available, and in order to get around unforeseen technical problems... Keeping a book up to date becomes impractical, and the structure of the book needs to be constantly revised.”

Does this sound like a problem your organization is facing today? Join the party! In 1990, Tim Berners Lee had the vision to foresee that, “The problems of information loss may be particularly acute at CERN, but in this case (as in certain others), CERN is a model in miniature of the rest of world in a few years time. CERN meets now some problems which the rest of the world will have to face soon.”

Technologists dreamed of the Web as Automation Heaven. Buy some software, get a website, and—presto—you were slashing costs and driving profits. It doesn’t work that way. People communicate, not machines. People write content, not machines. Sure, software can make communication and publishing processes more efficient, but if the quality of communication and content isn’t high to begin with, it’s the classic garbage in, garbage out situation.

Business to business (B2B) commerce on the Web was seen as a radical development that would create the perfect ‘frictionless’ marketplace. As more and more B2B websites bomb, a new reality is dawning. “Indeed, as many businesses now realize, the real gains from online B2B commerce will come not from trading but from better access to and the sharing of information,” the McKinsey Quarterly stated in March 2001. “This information might include supply-and-demand forecasts, reports of inventory levels at points along the supply chain, and market-tested predictions of the effect that the price of futures and other options will have on the availability of particular supplies, such as electricity and paper.”

The Internet and the Web bring together people who have content with people who want content. The Web allows organizations and individuals to receive and communicate information. Technology can make the communication more efficient, but technology can never write that easy-to-understand sales pitch for a product, never write that simple-to-follow installation guide for a piece of software, never write that exciting job description that makes someone want to join an organization. Technology can send an email autoresponse, but technology can never write a personal reply that really answers the question and helps close the sale. Only people – people who know their stuff and know how to write well – can do that.

Let nobody tell you that the Internet was ever anything other than a communications medium. People like J.C.R. Licklider, who dreamed up the Internet in the Sixties, had a vision. “We believe that we are entering a technological age,” Licklider wrote, “in which we will be able to interact with the richness of living information—not merely in the passive way that we have become accustomed to using books and libraries, but as active participants in an ongoing process, bringing something to it through our interaction with it, and not simply receiving something from it by our connection to it.”

Just what is publishing?

Just what is publishing? Publishing means “to make public”. It’s all about taking an idea, polishing it up and sending it out to a group of readers. Publishers make money by turning ideas into valuable content. In this new economy we are all publishers. Publishing supports the sale of our products and services. It tells people why they should buy something, how they get it to work, and how to fix it when it goes wrong.

The majority of us already participate in at least some sort of publishing process. If we work with content that is intended to reach a readership, whether that is our managers, colleagues, customers or investors, we are already participating in a publishing process.

Here are a few fundamentals of publishing that are relevant to everyone involved in creating content:

- ❑ Publishing is about quality control. You will reject far more than you will publish. At the American Economic Review, for example, about 12% of the submitted articles are accepted.
- ❑ In publishing, less is invariably more. Critical content is precise and to the point. In this information overloaded world there has never been a greater need to keep it short, simple and snappy.
- ❑ The reader is king. If nobody reads you, you’re dead. The publisher who doesn’t truly understand their readers – and publishes content for those readers – goes out of business.
- ❑ ‘Time-to-publish’ is critical. It’s not enough to have great content if you don’t get it to your reader before your competitor does
- ❑ Publishing is the business of profiting from content. A viable publisher knows how to make money – either directly or indirectly – out of content.

Today, we are working with content more than we have ever done before. Tomorrow, and for the rest of our careers, publishing will become key to our success. Understanding and gaining the skills of publishing will help us progress. Not gaining publishing understanding and skills will limit our progress.

The key difference between commerce and ecommerce is that commerce is selling with people and ecommerce is selling with content. You buy from a website because it has content that answers questions about product range, features, availability, price, support, customer references, company background, etc. A publishing strategy delivers such content.

Those organizations that have made the Internet work have all embodied publishing principles in their approach. That goes for AOL Time Warner, Microsoft, Yahoo, Amazon and Cisco. In fact, there is hardly a successful website that does not embody a professional publishing approach. All great websites are fueled by great content.

Just what is content? And how does content relate to information and knowledge?

- ❑ Knowledge is the useful stuff that’s inside our heads. It’s our ideas, our experience; it’s what we know about how things work, about how to make things better. We read content so as to gain knowledge.

- ❑ Information is the communication of knowledge. Information is a process, an activity. To inform is to impart knowledge to someone else. “10 percent off all TVs if you buy now!” is information at the point at which it is communicated. Information can be communicated in two ways. The first is informally, verbally. I meet you and I inform you: “Do you know there’s a shop down the road and it has 10 percent off all TVs if you buy now?” The second way is to formally communicate information through content.
- ❑ Content is how we formally structure our knowledge. We do this by putting it on paper, by putting it on film, by putting it on tape, by putting it on the Web. The Web is a giant container for content! It has become the ultimate place we go to get content. The type of content that this book deals with is the content you read, because that represents the vast majority of content on the Web.

Time to publish

It used to be that within the organization information was like gold. It was hoarded (and still is!). It represented power and influence. If you wanted it you had to make a major effort to get it. But that entire dynamic has changed, driven by an information-hungry society and powered by the Internet.

Now, information has become like milk. You need to distribute it quickly or it becomes worthless. What you know right now is not nearly as important as your ability to learn more. Your ability to communicate what you know is as important as what you know. In an age of stability, those who *know* inherit the earth. In an age of change, those who know *how to know* inherit it!

A defining characteristic of business over the last thirty years has been the focus on reducing the time-to-market for a product or service. In 1970, for example, it took ten years to develop a new car. By 2000, it took less than five. If a computer printer develops a fault, the quicker content is placed on a website describing how to fix that fault the better. Publishing that content six weeks after that fault has been isolated delivers far less value than publishing it immediately.

A primary reason the Internet was invented was to get quality content published faster. “The importance of improving decision-making processes,” J.C.R. Licklider and Robert Taylor wrote in 1968, “not only in government, but throughout business and the professions, is so great as to warrant every effort.” Those organizations that will succeed in the future will be those who can get the right content to the right person before their competitor does.

Global Sources, a company that publishes business-to-business content that helps Asian producers sell internationally, has found that the Web greatly reduces time-to-publish. According to Andrew Tanzer, writing for Forbes, it can take over two months for a print advertisement produced in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, to reach an importer in New York. Today, Global Sources, using staff armed with digital cameras, laptops and modems, can have product information in front of a potential buyer within two hours instead of two months.



Global Sources, a company that publishes B2B content on Asian suppliers has reduced its time-to-publish from two months to two hours as a result of the Internet

The Web has significantly reduced time-to-publish within the academic world. Tauber (1996) found that with appropriate content management systems in place, the time it takes an article to get published could be reduced by about two-thirds. While the Web gives the potential to publish faster, the reality for many websites is very different. We have come across the websites of major financial institutions who publish their Tuesday morning notes on the Web on a Friday. It is not uncommon to read about a major development in the papers, and to go to that organization's website and find nothing on it.

What this means is that just because the Web allows you to publish faster doesn't mean you will. Unless you have the appropriate commitment to the Web as a proper publishing medium, and unless you implement proper Web publishing systems and processes, your content is likely to be published faster by print than online, even though the latter offers a faster time-to-publish potential.

The organization as university

"The workplace is becoming more like a university setting." Duncan Campbell, International Labor Organization economist told Newsweek in 2001. Why? Well, you've heard the phrase, 'life-long learning'. Life-long learning describes a world where we are constantly learning new things so as to be able to do our jobs. We don't just go to the university for four years now, but rather the university comes to us everyday of our lives.

Consider the following:

- A 1998 study by George Mason University of college graduates found that 95 percent of respondents view lifelong learning as an essential part of their career
- According to a 2000 OECD report, since 1985, the expansion of knowledge-based industries has outpaced gross domestic product (GDP) growth in the developed countries. Knowledge-based industries now account for more than half of OECD-wide GDP.
- A 2000 PricewaterhouseCoopers report found that intellectual assets now account for 78 percent of the total value of American S&P 500 companies

We are life-long learners in a quest to make ourselves more productive, more intelligent, more employable, more valuable. The organization is an information organization now. The organization is a university now. It must use information to make itself more productive, more innovative, more profitable, more competitive.

Academics were the original information workers. Universities were the original information organizations. The modern organization and individual can learn much with regard to becoming a better 'information organization' by observing how academics and universities have dealt with content. Sure, they have made mistakes, but they have learned valuable lessons. Lessons we can all learn from.

The university is the home of the Internet. The Internet was invented by the US military in conjunction with several universities. The Internet was first embraced by universities. The Web was invented in a research organization. The Web was first embraced by universities. Do you see a pattern emerging?

The Internet and Web were embraced by universities around the world because academics and students saw in them tools for the better communication of ideas. These new tools were better than the older tools: letters, faxes, phones. The Internet and email allowed ideas to be shared more quickly, found more quickly, organized and published in a more efficient manner.

Content is the fuel that drives universities and academia. Such institutions have had to deal with the critical problem of maximizing the value they create from knowledge for centuries. They have found that one of the best ways to maximize the value of knowledge is to get it down on paper. They have found that one of the best ways to judge information workers (academics, scientists) is to judge them by what they publish.

Whether as creators of content, or through their libraries as organizers of content, academia has had to address how best to derive value from content; how best to get the right content to the right people at the right time. The academic organization has found that an essential way to derive value from knowledge is to get it published.

In fact, knowledge that is published is at the heart of the academic organization. Tenopir and King (1998) found that scientists view formal publication as either the most important or second-most important source of knowledge, as compared to other sources, such as laboratory-instrument readouts, computer-based research, or advice from colleagues, library staff, and support staff.

What are the characteristics of the modern academic information organization and worker?

- ❑ They publish more than ever. About 4,000 academic papers are published every day in the United States alone, which appear in 200,000-300,000 different journals
- ❑ They read more than ever. Between 1990 and 1993, for example, scientists at the University of Tennessee read an average of 188 scholarly articles per year
- ❑ They communicate more than ever. The Journal of Electronic Publishing in 2000 reported on a study that found that scientists spend 50-60% of their time communicating

"Publish or perish" has long been a motto for those who work in academia. Today, it becomes a motto for all information workers. The academic is the original 'information worker.' A large part of what they do is come up with or explore ideas. They then publish the results as content, whether that be research papers, reports, studies, books, etc. If they don't publish, they don't get recognized by their peers and superiors, they don't get funding for further research; their career goes into stasis.

Resh (1998): states that, “Research articles... are the traditional “coin of the realm” for academic scientists. Through their publications scientists either become known or remain unknown. Moreover, their initial appointment and eventual tenure, promotions, and research funding are largely based on the quality and the quantity of their publications.” According to Varian (1997), “At most academic organizations there is almost a frantic drive to publish. It can be dog eat dog, publish or perish. If you don’t publish, you’re not visible. If you’re not visible, your career goes in reverse.”

Know your reader

Think of your website as a publication and it all begins to make a lot of sense. Think of the person who visits your website as a reader and your objectives become clearer. Because the Web is not all that different from all those other communication tools: print, phone, fax.

Yes, there are differences. Yes, Web publishing has different dynamics and rules than, say, print publishing. But the core objective is still the same: to communicate with other people.

The language that is used today to describe the Internet is dry, technical and non-descriptive. As someone pointed out, the only two groups of people who are called ‘users’ are drug users and computer users. (‘Traffic’ is another word that both have in common.) ‘User’ is such an all-embracing word that it is essentially meaningless. ‘Usability’ is a clunky, awkward word that lacks style and elegance. In this sense, it describes the opposite of what it’s supposed to describe.

For centuries humans have described their tools and the people who use them by their primary function. We don’t call people horse users, car users or pen users. We call them riders, drivers and writers. We call a person who uses a bicycle a cyclist because cycling is the primary thing they do when using a bicycle. That doesn’t stop them also being a saddle-sitter and handlebar-holder. We still call a computer a ‘computer’ even though it does a lot more than compute.

The fact that we have not described the Web and the people who use it by their primary function has led to great confusion. *Content Critical* is about clearing up that confusion. It’s about giving you a clear picture in language you can understand and relate to. *Content Critical* talks about a website as a publication, because that is the primary function of a website. Yes, it’s a different kind of publication. It’s more interactive and transaction-driven than traditional publications, but it’s still a publication. Like all publications it’s a place where people come to be informed about stuff.

Content Critical looks on the person who visits your website as a reader. (If the primary activity of your website is audio or video, then you have listeners and viewers.) Here we should understand the larger meaning of ‘to read’. To read is not simply to “interpret written symbols”. The core root of ‘to read’ is to “discern the meaning of something”. That’s what information workers do. The Web reader is highly educated, task-oriented and time-starved. They come to your website with the objective of finding stuff that will make them more knowledgeable; that will allow them to act. How you meet that objective is how they will judge you.