

Advice for the next century

Future role of newspapers discussed by panel

By Ann Marie Kerwin

What is a newspaper? Is it a printed vehicle to convey information? Or is it a place for a community to exchange information? Is it a guide to the region it serves? Or is it a catalyst that formulates and defines issues that concern readers?

How does all of the new media technology fit into the newspaper's mission?

With the array of new technology available to newspapers, audiotex, videotex, databases and fax services, the decision about what to invest in can be daunting. In order to make an informed decision, a newspaper's leaders need to sit down and decide where it wants to be in 10 years.

The role a newspaper should take in the next century was discussed by

leads one to see the end as the information itself. The business of newspapers seems to be about providing more and more information.

However, Schrage argued that the business of newspapers, media, and all the new media technology, is to help people communicate with one another.

"New media technology is a medium for relationships. New media affect how people communicate with each other, how people relate to each other. If you change the medium, you change the relationship," Schrage said. "New technology creates new relationships."

He argued that new media technologies are about the essence of being human, things like relationships, like community, how people communicate with each other.

tionship between advertisers and people, he said.

By creating new communities, newspapers add value to what they offer, Schrage said.

A fax newspaper is the wrong approach, according to Schrage who sees it as a pure packaging job.

Fax services could be used for polling and to provide services such as menus and maps to restaurants by adding a fax number to the bottom of a review, he said. He added that fax technology should be used to build a rapport with the reader, not just repackaging the news.

Newspaper marketers should be looking at ways to integrate the community into the newspaper, according to Schrage. He believes value is added by creating the community, and media need to treat people like people who want to communicate with one another.

In Stockton at a meeting with readers and top editors, a man stood up and said, "Show us our heroes."

several speakers at the recent International Newspaper Marketing Association conference in Dallas. How to reinvent the newspaper for survival in the next century's media environment was the question being answered.

Information or community?

For the newspaper business to survive, it needs to define what role it wants to serve in its community. The message from Michael Schrage, a visiting scholar at the Center for Coordination Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was that newspapers, and media, should be in the community-building business.

"How you define your business is key in how you relate to customers and what you offer your customers," Schrage, a technology expert, said.

The Information Age isn't, according to Schrage. It never happened, and isn't going to happen.

People are not as interested in information as they are in the relationships that are built with the sharing of information.

All the new media technology that allows newspapers to present information in a better, faster way often

"Humans are information processors, but anybody who defines them that way would be better off programming a computer instead of editing or publishing a newspaper," Schrage said.

The first thing Gutenberg printed was not an almanac or encyclopedia, it was the Bible, the symbol of the community and the time. The point is simple, Schrage explained, when it comes to media — the importance of information is subordinate to the importance of community.

So the real value of a medium is not in the information it carries, but in the community it creates, he said.

The notion of designing a newspaper that is a faster read seems wrong, Schrage believes. Newspapers should be inviting people to spend more time with them, not less. Create a newspaper that people want to spend time with.

Schrage believes a major problem is that newspapers have stopped believing they are a medium for communities. He said the media should mediate between advertisers and customers. Newspapers should not just act as a broker of information but become people who manage the rela-

Building communities

Already using this idea of building communities is the Gannett Company's News 2000 project. News 2000 is being implemented at all the Gannett-owned newspapers. The idea of community is a large part of this effort.

Addressing INMA attendees, Betty Liddick, executive editor of the *Stockton (Calif.) Record*, related her first encounter with readers when she arrived in Stockton a year ago.

"I was stunned by reader reaction. Many folks weren't indifferent to the paper as many readers have become these days. They bitterly hated us. So much so, staffers said they often were reluctant to tell people outside the paper where they worked," Liddick said.

Reader complaints included too much negative news about their community and home. They did not want crime news to be the only thing their paper covered.

News 2000 works to discover what readers want in their paper. In Stockton at a meeting with readers and top editors, a man stood up and said, "Show us our heroes."

The community was asking for a balance, not just crime news but stories that showed when Stockton residents were achieving positively, Liddick said.