PUB 477 – Publishing Practicum Paper
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**Analysis of Practice:**

**Examining the Differences In Digital Layouts**

**Between Publications in the Corporate**

**and Non-for-Profit Sectors**

**Introduction**

The proliferation of news consumption on digital devices has steadily increased with the evolution of web technology. As such, many of Canada's cornerstone news publications, such as *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*, have made efforts to adapt to these constantly evolving digital publishing formats by designing web layouts for a variety of screen sizes, that adhere to the attractiveness and usability for readers. In examining their web layouts — for both desktop and mobile screens — it's evident that they've been designed in ways that align with their corporate mandates and business models, which both compare and contrast with non-for-profit or alternative publications, such as Simon Fraser University's (SFU) student newspaper *The Peak.* This structural analysis will compare the digital platforms of Canada's most prominent media outlets *The National Post* and *The Globe and Mail* with SFU's student publication *The Peak*, and will first focus on each media outlet's web organization — that is, how the components on each platform are visually arranged in order to adhere to reader likeability. As part of this analysis, the paper will discuss the use of photos and illustrations, the prominence of text, colour schemes, and social media presences. It will then delve into each website's use of advertising, emphasizing the prominence of advertisements, their strategic placement, and any visual restrictions placed on digital readers in accessing certain web content. Finally this paper will compare the differences between each mobile layout, and how these re-orientations of web content differ from their desktop counterparts in adhering to the ease of usability.

The analysis will lead into a discussion focused primarily on *The Peak*'s layouts, and will identify the reasons for these points of comparison or contrast, which include

differences in staff training and expertise between the media environments, varying

consumer publishing platforms, such as WordPress, and the web analytics used to attract

readership, differences in the amount of funding acquired by each publication, and

differing levels of what this paper will call 'staff motivation' to focus attention and

resources on the digital formats, propelled by varying readership bases and circulation

numbers. The purpose here is to distinguish between the corporate-consumer and non-

for-profit mandates and business models as influencers of certain web layouts and styles,

and to provide suggestions on how *The Peak* may be able to improve its web presence by

grabbing from corporate models, while staying true to its alternative mandate.


**Desktop website analysis**

*The Peak:*

Because *The Peak* is the focal point of this analysis, it would be logical to begin

with a description of its full-screen, or desktop, web presence. The website conveys a

white, minimalist layout, with large rectangular visuals that are evenly spaced to create

satisfying geometric alignment. All pages of the website are clearly displayed at the head

of the website, along with visible graphics that hyperlink to *The Peak*'s social media

accounts — Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Situated along the right side is a link to

*The Peak*'s digital version of its physical newspaper, while below is a list of the most

popular articles being clicked on at the current time. It's worth noting that all online

content is accessible to readers, as will be elaborated upon in contrast with the upcoming

corporate newspapers. It's also worth noting that *The Peak*'s website contains far fewer

section-pages than do its corporate counterparts; presenting only the basic sections

expected of a newspaper — opinions, arts, news, features, sports, humour, and a multimedia section. The head of a page dedicated to a story displays a large photo, with a width that spreads out over most of the page. The text is conveniently large and easy to read, while the pull quotes are bold and easily distinguishable. Noticeable is the website's photographic diversity, as it makes large use of not only photos but illustrations from a variety of different artists. There are also 'photo-illustrations,' which have been created with photo editing software, such as a Photoshop and Illustrator.

As expected for a non-for-profit publication, the website displays very few advertisements, if any. Those that can be found are infrequent, minimalistic and unenticing, and are used to persuade people to advertise for the publication's print edition, to contribute articles or illustrations to the publication, to complete *The Peak*'s readership survey, or to submit an event to *The Peak*'s Classifieds page. The webpage does not make use of pop-up or consumer-targeted advertisements, nor moving, flashy visuals, but overall gains visual strength in its breathable, spacious display, enhanced by strong, vibrant photos, large text and easily navigable sections.

*The National Post:*

On the corporate-consumer end, *The National Post* serves as Canada's flagship conservative news media publication. In relation to *The Peak*, its website is far more cluttered and busy; the body of all the accumulated content is condensed into a web-frame that isn't nearly as wide, and because the webpage includes considerably more text than *The Peak*'s, it's less breathable, and tends to bombard the reader with what could be considered enough text for it to be a little disorientating upon first glance. The text itself

is smaller in comparison, and the homepage includes brief content descriptions or excerpts of each story. Similar to *The Peak*, the website is predominantly white, but incorporates a brilliant yellow around the logo at the head of the page, which could be considered more visually aesthetic, and is used as part of the brand identifier for consumers. An additional contrast is that *The National Post* unapologetically wedges in lists of headlines without accompanying photos, excerpts or descriptions, which may be a hindrance to readers who'd like some other sort of brief descriptor when choosing whether or not to read the full article.

At the head of the homepage is a similar, though extensive, navigation list with links to all other main sections of the newspaper. Given that the paper caters to a broad Canadian audience, prominently displayed sub-sections such as "books," "horoscopes," and "graphics," are far more niche and diverse than what *The Peak* covers. But while its navigation bar is prominent, its social media presence doesn't seem to be as much, as the webpage does not take effort to immediately link readers to its social media sources, and instead leaves viewers to search for them by scrolling down the page. Another noticeable difference is that *National Post* articles diligently include in-text hyperlinks to outside and inside sources where appropriate. A quick sift through many of *The Peak*'s news, opinions and arts entries reveal that hyperlinks to outside sources are not used as prominently, if any at all, which may hinder credibility of research. Finally, the *Post*'s use of photography is less efficient than *The Peak*, and includes minimally-sized photos on its homepage, all of which are actual photographs; there are no illustrations or photo-illustrations as on *The Peak*'s website. In the end, it's evident that the *Post* relies heavily on a text-heavy layout to entice its readership.

Because *The National Post* is follows a corporate business model, it takes effort to include various advertisements throughout its website, which are very small, and rather inconspicuous, but are strategically placed alongside headlines or pages that deal with similar content. For example, on *The National Post*'s Investing page, there are very small advertisements that say the page is "presented by BlackRock," an investment management company, or is sponsored by Workopolis, an employment company. Interestingly, a 2012 study on news website advertising from the Pew Research Centre states that among 22 North American news websites examined, advertisements from the finance industry were presented far more than any other type of advertisement (Olmstead et. al, p. 2); a finding that fits with *The National Post*'s advertising scheme. Alongside these ads are large banners that fill the empty side-columns, for various services such as GolfBC, Electric Go Kart Racing, online fashion stores, among others. In other words, the website hosts a diverse array of advertisements, which could be target to consumers based on their browser histories, that fill up the large margins around the actual content — which would possibly explain why the company's content is purposefully condensed. Additionally, the site furthers its for-profit business model by asking its readers to subscribe to its services. A small "subscribe" option lies inside the navigation bar at the top of the homepage, as well as another link at the bottom alongside links to advertising opportunities and the company's 'ePaper' access. While more conservative, *The National Post* clearly conveys its for-profit intent through its layout.

*The Globe and Mail:*

One of Canada's other flagship publications, *The Globe and Mail*, has website elements that are visually similar to *The National Post*'s. Similar to both previously mentioned newspapers, the navigation is clearly constructed at the head of the page, and the sections are even colour-coded, so as to identify a colour to the respective section, which could make it more convenient thus enticing for the reader. While the overall layout is not as condensed as the *Post*'s, *The Globe* similarly features a text-heavy website, with small photographs, few illustrations, a white background with dashes of red in both the logo and in select hyperlinks. This website, too, has a diverse array of section-pages that appeal to Canadians from all demographics, including "Life," and "Real Estate." And its social media links aren't immediately visible upon refreshing the page, as with the *Post*'s.

However, a few differences arise in *The Globe*'s approach to its web layout. Firstly, while there aren't any on-page excerpts or descriptors under many of the main headlines on the homepage, there are 'cursor previews,' or boxes with small descriptions of the article, that pop up after the cursor has rested over the headline for a few seconds. While convenient for squeezing extra information onto the webpage, it might not be as useful as intended, as 'headline skimmers' may be unaware of the feature or impatient with having to wait the extra time for the descriptor to appear. Moreover, the site does a decent job of providing its highlighted stories with a layout that's reminiscent of *The Peak*'s. The more important news articles standout with larger text, are given more homepage space, and once clicked, reveal a webpage with large images, often including interactive graphics, and larger, more spacious and easily readable text — very much in

line with how *The Peak* presents all of its web articles. Finally, *The Globe* uses headshots of its writers as photographs to accompany many of its articles, particularly opinion-editorials and regular commentary columns. This could be used as a marketing scheme; a familiar face matched with a familiar writing-style could be used as a tool to interest viewership.

      *The Globe* also makes generous use of advertisements, and really tends to advertise its own services more so than *The National Post.* For instance, there is an unmoving banner that sticks to the bottom of the screen even as a user scrolls down the page. It advertises "Globe Unlimited" for only 99 cents per week for the first month of service. Access to content on this website is the most restrictive of all three news websites mentioned; certain articles are specifically labeled for "Unlimited" users only. In contrast, *The National* Post is covert about which content it hides from users who have not subscribed; it advertises "unlimited access" to its full website with a paid subscription, but it does not specifically label which articles are out of bounds. *The Globe's* website additionally sports more noticeable "Subscribe" buttons at the head and bottom of the website, for those who wish to pay the monthly fee. Finally, the website is overtly restrictive in that it will block access to its regular content after a non-paying user has clicked through a certain number of articles — a small 'countdown' box appears at the bottom of the screen, notifying the user of how many articles they have left to read before they do not have further access. This, of course, is in stark contrast to *The Peak*'s non-for-profit model, which allows readers to view all of its online content at any time.

**Mobile analysis**

It's also worth briefly comparing the mobile or smartphone website layouts for each of these media outlets. Firstly, it's evident, given the forthcoming discussion on corporate mobile layouts, that *The Peak* has not made the best use of its mobile format. While mobile sites are small, given the spatial constraints of the screen, *The Peak*'s appears almost too simplistic in that it may be unappealing to the viewer. And while the use of large, vibrant photos may work well for its large-screen format, it just doesn't seem to hold the same appeal on a small screen. The photos, themselves, are cut off so that viewers are unable to see the photos in their entirety, the once-appealing large headline text now overlaps and obscures the corresponding photos, and the graphics that showcase the multimedia section have not been adjusted to fit the screen properly. While there is a navigation "Menu" button at the head of page, which offers quick access to various sections on the website, mobile-viewers may easily miss it, and may find it cumbersome to scroll manually through all of the headlines listed below. Reading through an article on a mobile device is however much easier and less visually straining, as all the text and images are nicely placed atop one another, without any of the visuals feeling crammed or obscured. Overall, the visual elements of the *The Peak*'s website are more appropriate for a full-sized screen, and do not adhere nicely to the visual attractiveness and convenience of a screen on a small mobile device.

Conversely, *The National Post*'s text-heavy full-screen layout works very well with a handheld screen, as do the small photographs. A menu and search bar at the top of the screen are clearly visible, and it's evident that the company has prioritized text in it's mobile layout, as readers are less likely to focus on the photographic aspects of a story if

its on a small-screen. A downside here is that viewers have to scroll through numerous advertisements as they move down the screen, though the website takes care to select only the most important headlines on the homepage, rather than to leave viewers scrolling through all of the week's content, as *The Peak* does. Reading through an article on the *Post*'s mobile site is relatively easy, as the type in the headlines isn't too large, and the articles, themselves, do not contain many photos or other graphics. Additionally, the mobile layout immediately presents the reader with links to social media outlets, so that the users may share the content with their social circles — options that *The Peak* does not offer its readers.

The *Globe and Mail*, like the *Post*, succeeds in fitting its text-heavy website into a neat, clean, navigable mobile design. The photos and text are well proportioned, and the visual elements that comprise a page that contains a full article are almost identical in design to *The National Post.* A difference from both previous publications, however, is that the navigation sticks to the top of the screen as a reader scrolls down the page, thus making it more convenient for the reader to access the menu items without having to scroll all the way back to the top. But given that a banner advertising "Globe Unlimited" sticks to the bottom of the screen, this further limits the screen space in which the viewer can read the website's actual content. It's also worth noting that *The Globe*'s mobile site prominently advertises a separate mobile news app that the company has developed for its brand.

**Discussion**

As previously mentioned, the publications analyzed have been recognized as ones with oppositional mandates and differing business models. *The Peak* is a university publication organized, created, and distributed by students on a weekly basis, and as such it falls into the category of "alternative" media. Being part of a non-for-profit society, *The Peak* stresses the prominent role of public participation in the creation of a free-for-all product; a community-centered service publication of which SFU students and faculty readily contribute their writing, photos and illustrations. *The Peak* acquires most of its annual funding from a mandatory student levy collected through the Simon Fraser Student Society (SFSS website, 2016), as well as the funds garner through advertising revenues. The newspaper's print run amasses 3,000 to 4,000 copies per week, a circulation that's much lower than that of the corporate counterparts, and the people who make it are by no means professionally trained. Conversely, *The National Post* and *The Globe and Mail* are for-profit publications, as well as two of the cornerstone newspapers in Canada. Their publications cater to nation-wide consumer bases that pay for a professionally crafted product created by trained journalists, editors and other media-makers. As such, these companies present their publication with the aims of profitability; they craft business models based upon capitalizing from consumers, with graphics and text that shape a satisfying product. In other words, their corporations are not community or service oriented, nor are they funded through a student or public interest Society that aims to fulfill these goals.

In particular, *The Globe* and *The Post* are driven by circulation numbers, which, according to Sammye Johnson, et. al (2012), are the total number of copies of the

publication sold to consumers (p. 16). In today's digital environment, these audience numbers not only encompass newsstand purchases and subscriptions, but also have expanded to incorporate the casual web audience — the type of consumer who finds news articles through social media, Google, and other online links. Because online advertising revenues are so valuable, news companies will try everything they can to make sure their website is attractive and convenient in order to increase circulation, which involves the use of metrics and web-analytical tools to understand how readers are engaging with the website during their visit. Apart from *The* Globe and *The Post,* big news corporations today, such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, have readied themselves for the increased importance of web traffic by building teams within their newsrooms to analyze website metrics and develop audience engagement strategies (Cherubini et. al, 2016, p. 12). Various web analytic programs today capture an abundance of reader activity, including how the reader found the site, which pages were clicked, how long the reader stayed on a page, and what website the reader went to after the news site (Johnson et. al, 2013, p. 31). Often analytics programs offer minute-by-minute data on individual articles, and can be accessed by staff members through not only desktop, but mobile platforms as well (Cherubini, 2016, p. 12). Apart from constructing a website design that is logically user-friendly, such as incorporating easy-to-understand navigation buttons, a news site's daily web traffic data inform decision-making through daily changes to headlines, photographs, colours, text and fonts, and other visual elements (p. 14). Metrics not only dictate the visual branding choices, but can even dictate what types of journalistic content is written for the website, including which articles should be pushed on social media in order to be shared amongst other

consumers. Given the importance of mobile access, it's evident that *The Globe* and *The Post* have taken their web stats to create web designs that cater especially to mobile consumers. While their desktop layouts have been meticulously designed and clearly branded, their mobile designs have been constructed in ways that make them extremely user-friendly, enticing, and more likely to boost up audience engagement. The evolvements in web design dictated by metrics would also explain why both corporate new sites have overall similar web and mobile layouts to each other. Seeing as both are in engaged in competition for nearly the same market, similar patterns in their web analytics are bound to be discovered.

With the above examples, it's fair to say that, in the corporate sector, part of a news website's business model is to construct its brand and web design based off of what web traffic data claims will garner the highest web circulation. Though another addition to a corporate news model is the use of targeted advertisements to attract specific customer interests. The website analysis conducted for this paper revealed that the *Post* held advertisements for GoKart racing and golfing; it's reasonable to assume that these ads may not be the same for every online reader, and as advertising provides such a high source of revenue for the news company, the importance of constructing a perfect web layout is amplified.

On the other hand, *The Peak*'s website is simplistic, spacious and with a rather amateur appearance compared to the professional web designs from *The Post* and *The Globe*. *The Peak* visibly appears less concerned with readership numbers and more concerned with providing a basic platform for the SFU community to contribute their work. This is further reflected by the fact that all of the website's content is freely

accessible, and while *The Peak* does seek advertising revenue, there aren't any corporate advertisements or viewing restrictions, which further conveys that advertising is appropriate but not a necessity for *The Peak* to survive.

Also, while its desktop layout is more easily navigable than its corporate counterparts, *The Peak*'s mobile layout is a different matter, as the elements of its full-screen design have not been properly fitted to its mobile format. *The Globe* and *The Post*'s mobile designs are, in many respects, more satisfying than their full-screen versions, as readers are not bombarded with swaths of condensed text, but are left to scroll through one headline at a time, due to the screen's spatial constraints. And while *The Peak* offers the same options in its mobile format, its large, ill-fitted images, headlines, and inconvenient navigation system show that the Society's mobile layout has not been as high of a priority as its other products because it hasn't had to worry about garnering revenue through a user-friendly mobile platform.

Being part a non-for-profit society, the discrepancies in *The Peak*'s web presences could also be due to a plethora of other factors, the first being that, in comparison to its corporate counterparts, the student newspaper lacks staff and professional training. Because there isn't a journalism school at Simon Fraser University, the employees at *The Peak* learn their jobs through knowledge that has been passed down from their predecessors. A small collective of 16 students, the employees at this newspaper could benefit from professional — or at least more experienced — web skills in order to improve the newspaper's website presence. Additionally, the significant lack of funding provided for *The Peak* discourage the staff from purchasing a more expensive web-publishing platform, which would offer more utilities and options for web analytics. *The*

*Peak* currently uses a WordPress account, which is an industry standard, however both *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post* have upgraded to the WordPress VIP publishing software, which boasts many more tools and features for metric analysis and corporate purposes. Because *The Peak* has such limited funding — the bulk of which comes from semesterly student assessments fees — the society must budget its resources to serve the SFU community as effectively as possible, which may factor into why its mobile site hasn't been upgraded. Finally, while there have been discussions among *The Peak* staff to upgrade on its web presence, both through a full-screen and mobile redesign, there's been a lack of 'staff motivation' to carry through with such tasks, due to the conscious notions that the newspaper has such a low readership compared to the corporate sector. *The Peak*'s mobile presence hasn't been a priority because its been focusing its few resources on making sure the print and desktop web editions are up-to-par with reader satisfaction.

Though while *The Peak* faces definite obstacles in maintaining its web presence, should more resources be put toward its mobile site, it would be able to create a design that fulfills more of its mandate as a student publication — in particular those parts of its sector which overlap with those of corporate business models. To elaborate, both the non-for-profit and corporate sectors, in this specific case, are trying to obtain as many viewers as they possibly can. *The Peak* could draw upon a few of the corporate sector's tactics, such as analyzing and using website metrics through WordPress or other software, in order to shape its mobile and desktop websites, and to entice individual readers with the kinds of content that they personally would enjoy. In doing this, it may further achieve its goal of providing a satisfying publication prone to higher readership numbers. This

would best be accomplished by hiring an employee with experience in web analytics and audience engagement, and would require the staff to engage in collective discussions with each other to set out some clear goals for increasing audience engagement, which could even be undertaken by each of the editorial staff members.

As for what could be accomplished with the physical aspects of its current desktop layout, *The Peak* could firstly include in its articles more frequent in-text hyperlinks to outside sources, which would define the publication's credibility, and would make the publication seem more knowledgeable. *The Peak* could also post headshots for all of its writers, especially its editorial columnists, as the website publishes a variety of "web exclusive" columns. This would lend to author-familiarity, which would be an enticing web feature. These two recommendations use up barely any resources, and are things that *The Peak* staff could simply be more cognizant of. On the mobile end, *The Peak* could upgrade its web presence by properly reducing the size of its images and by placing headlines with smaller type alongside their photographs — similar in fashion to *The Globe* and *The Post*. It could further increase its social media traffic by including links to its social media accounts at the top of the page, and again at the bottom, so that readers are fully aware of the networking options available to them. Finally, its navigation bar should always be available to the reader, given that the screen is so small and viewers more likely find it an inconvenience to scroll to the top of a mobile page in order to access other sections of the site. *The Peak* could invest more time and money to create a navigation bar that sticks to the top of the screen even as users scroll up and down in the way *The Globe and Mail* presents itself. This isn't only convenient but it's logical given the spatial constraints of a mobile device. This research

paper's intention is to recommend that *The Peak* invest its resources into upgrading its web layouts, in particular its mobile design, so that it may entice more of its core readership, who are accustomed to the mobile age.

**Conclusion**

This paper has analyzed the differences between web publications from the non-for-profit and corporate sectors, with the aim of distinguishing their designs as products of their respective mandates and business models. Given that *The Peak* is the focal point of this analysis, the emphasis has been on the student newspaper as an alternative and service publication, and how it can borrow traits from the corporate sector's examples, in order to achieve a higher readership and increase satisfaction with its product, while staying true to its non-profit mandate. Given that *The Peak* lacks the resources both *The Globe* and *The Post* have access to, it has made due with what it has in order to provide as satisfying a product as possible, while reflecting the importance of community and public participation in its production. Though, because its mobile presence, in particular, is lacking in an age of mobility, it may be necessary for *The Peak* to seriously consider upgrades to its hand-held platforms. Examples, here, have been provided on where upgrades are necessary through the lens of profitability, while providing insight into motivations of each publishing sector.

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