

# If this formerly clever headline could talk, would it be agog over Lady Gaga?

## MEDIA NOTES FROM CI

headlines to what content is posted on your site, and people like me are hardly exempt. If I write about Radar revealing Mel Gibson's abusive calls to his girlfriend, or the coverage of Tiger Woods's multiple mistresses, my traffic will undoubtedly soar above that for a sober report on how nonprofit groups are pursuing investigative reporting. Like most of my colleagues, I try not to let that affect my judgment, but it hangs in the ether.

Newspapers, of course, have always chased circulation, dating back to the days when editors used racy headlines or sensational crimes to goose street sales. The tabloids still play this game.

But now, for the first time in history, newspapers no longer have to rely on polls and focus groups — or crude guesswork — to determine their most popular offerings. Instead, editors know instantly how many hits a story, column or blog is getting — and can adjust their strategy accordingly. What's hot may get bigger display; what's not may shrink or be kicked off the home page (which makes a statement, even if most readers don't come in through that front door).

"When people worry about whether we're straying from our mission," says Marcus Brauchli, The Post's executive editor, "what they're worried about is are we overemphasizing a photo gallery about a celebrity in hopes of generating traffic. Are we impairing our ability to do good journalism in the areas that matter most to us? And the answer to that is no."

While The Post is a general-interest paper, its mandate is covering Washington "as a place for people who live here and work here" and as "a seat of power," Brauchli says. Of course, he says, the goal is



**WHAT ARE YOU LOOKIN' AT?** From left, John McCain, Lisa Murkowski; Heidi Montag and Spencer Pratt; Tiger Woods and Elin Nordegren; and Miley Cyrus are all newsmakers in modern journalism.

"connecting our journalism to the greatest number of eyeballs possible. There's a great deal of skepticism among old-school journalists about these practices."

As if to underscore that The Post's priorities are paying off, four of the top 10 blogs always involve politics, while two chronicle the Redskins and one is Celebritygology, an aggregation of bold-faced gossip. That seems like a healthy balance.

But minute-by-minute temptations remain, even if organizations don't follow the Gawker model of paying writers bonuses for pieces that draw the most hits.

On a recent Wednesday morning, some Post editors were frustrated that the primary election results weren't garnering many hits — despite the fact that

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John McCain had just won his party's nomination and Lisa Murkowski was on the verge of losing hers. What was hot, the traffic directors said, was Woods's ex-wife, Elin Nordegren, telling People that her life had been "hell" since the golfer's sex scandal, a photo of an alligator in the Chicago River, and a video posted on Gawker of a British woman throwing a feral cat into a dumpster.

On the same morning, the hottest Google search was for Alaskan election results (in that Senate race in which Murkowski was a lost to a political unknown backed by Palin). Next up were Atlantic City air show 2010; Hurricane Danielle path; Nicole "Hoopz" Alexander (winner of a VH-1 reality show and Shaq's girlfriend), and Kat Stacks (a

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE WASHINGTON POST

buxom blogger who dishes dirt on celebrities). No, I wasn't familiar with the last two, either. Zaleski says such trend research is used mainly to tweak headlines and search terms. But, she adds, "what we're realizing is that we can't live in a vacuum, where we decide what people want to read."

Some sites make no bones about packaging policy pieces with NSFV photos. Female critics have taken particular aim at the Huffington Post, whose approach to blogging, headlines and aggregation have made it a huge success. In recent weeks, Arianna Huffington's site has included such prominent headlines as "Elizabeth Hurley: My breasts are natural"; "Miley loses virginity, flashes Brazilian hair in new movie"; and "Heidi, Spencer & Former Playmate Exchange Profanities Over Sex Tape." One recent day, the site's second most-popular story was "Katy Perry Shows Off Her Curves, Wows on Letterman"; another, it was "When 'Real Housewives' Wear Bikinis."

But no publication is exempt. On Friday, the second-most e-mailed Times story was headlined "For the A-Cup Crowd, Minimal Assets are a Plus" — a feature contending that these days "it's not uncommon for women with modest busts to flaunt what little they've got."

Naturally, those who grew up as analog reporters wonder: Is journalism becoming a popularity contest? Does this mean pieces about celebrity sex

traps will take precedence over corruption in Afghanistan? Why pay for expensive foreign bureaus if they're not generating enough clicks? Doesn't all this amount to pandering?

Potentially, sure. But news organizations such as The Post and the Times have brands to protect. They can't simply abandon serious news in favor of the latest wardrobe malfunction without alienating some of their longtime readers. What they gain in short-term hits would cost them in long-term reputation.

The cynical view would be that Senate primaries are out and animal videos are in. But the track record suggests that enough people have an appetite for good reporting that the feral cats can be kept to a minimum.

Now let's see, what sizzling search terms can I enter for this column? Tiger Woods, multiple mistresses, Sarah Palin, Elizabeth Hurley, Katy Perry. . .

## An international star

President Obama received far more favorable coverage from Arab television networks than on American newscasts during the first 18 months of his term.

In a research paper by Stephen Farnsworth and Robert Lichter of George Mason University and Roland Schatz of Media Tenor International, the coverage on Arab networks was 77 percent more positive than negative last year, compared with 2.6 percent more positive on European networks and 7.9 percent more negative on the ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox News evening newscasts.

The five Arab networks examined include al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya. The authors, who examined 76,844 statements and presented their findings to the American Political Science Association, also looked at two BBC channels and two state-run networks in Germany.

Obama's coverage was less favorable in the first six months of this year, but the geographic disparity remained: 4 percent more negative than positive in the Middle East, 6.5 percent more negative in Europe and 12 percent more negative on American networks. "Reporting on the president's character was a major part of international news reports on Obama, and was an area where Obama was highly regarded," the study says.

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## IMOGEN QUEST BY OLIVIA WALCH

Winner of The Post's "America's Next Great Cartoonist" contest.

