

So now the National Journal and American Political Network have a site for political professionals called Cloakroom (www.cloakroom.com). ABC News finally got its own site up on the Web and put it on a computer screen next to Peter Jennings on the World News for all the world to see. As for the Washington Post, Teren says that "when we did not have a strong Web presence of our own, publishing a comprehensive site like PoliticsNow was best accomplished in partnership with other news organizations..." And to finish his sentence for him: "... but we don't need them any more."

**end

**word count: 1657

Journalist Evans Witt, who had started with ElectionLine and then became executive editor of PoliticsNow, announced his intention to leave. Witt's departure, n top of vacancies in other top positions, revealed fissures between the partners that he'd been able to hold together. "The reporting to higher management was never very well organized," said one member of the staff. "With Evans leaving it became clear they weren't going to be able to ad hoc it any more."

While Witt was leaving, former Disney Interactive executive Marc Teren was arriving. What was the relationship between Teren's arrival and the death of PoliticsNow?

"My guess is quite a bit," says Doug Bailey, the founder of American Political Network and part of the PoliticsNow executive board. "Within 45 minutes of anybody at the National Journal or ABC meeting with Marc Teren it was very clear the site was dead." All Teren will say is that while it is "natural to want to connect the two events...it was more of a coincidence that the decision happened to coincide with my arrival."

Bailey describes the moment of death this way: "The meeting of the executive board with representatives of the three partners [in the last week of February] was the first one Marc Teren had attended...This was the first time Bob Kaiser [the editor of the newspaper] ever showed up. It was very clearly his [Teren's] decision. He had thought it through and it was also very clear that Kaiser had been brought along to enforce it." Bill Abrams, vice president for business development at ABC News confirms that it was the Washington Post's initiative to kill the site. "They decided it didn't make sense for them anymore and they withdrew. I wasn't shocked or surprised by this, although in terms of the timing I thought it was precipitous."

The press release said the parties agreed on the need to focus on their core brands. ABC News had been prepared to make PoliticsNow a section of its recently released site (www.abcnews.com), but that wasn't good enough for the Washington Post, which Teren says will deliver "the best political coverage" on Washingtonpost.com.

"Did they [the Washington Post] want PoliticsNow to fail?" asks Bailey. "Of course not. But one interesting question is did they want it to succeed? Remember that the Washington Post's definition of their role in the world is that they are the foremost authority on all things to do with politics in Washington and elsewhere. Once the election was over here was a permanent site whose goal was to become the site of record for American politics and it was called PoliticsNow and not Washingtonpost.com, and I assume that was a problem for them."

A clear case of infanticide? Evans Witt, the former executive editor, defends the Post, claiming that ABC and the National Journal could have continued PoliticsNow if they'd wanted to. But Troy Schneider, the former managing editor, follows the blood trail back to the door of the Post: "Technically all three partners agreed to shut it down, and technically the National Journal and ABC could have gone it alone.... These things are true. But on extremely short notice they would have had to create an entirely new company. The payroll was managed by the Post, so was the office space, the servers, everything.... The Post pulled out in a way that was intentionally designed to make sure that PoliticsNow did not continue."

approaches were complimentary a marriage of convenience was arranged and the staffs were merged. In early June, the combined site was re-launched as PoliticsNow. While the partners were nominally equals, the Post handled every aspect of administering the business. Ominously for the long-term prospects of PoliticsNow, the Post gave birth to Washingtonpost.com (www.washingtonpost.com) shortly thereafter.

Glory Days

The National Journal wanted the Post and ABC for their promotional muscle, but it quickly became clear that PoliticsNow was on its own. "We were a huge critical success," says Steve Hull, senior vice president at the National Journal. "But we had some real disadvantages--no promotional clout or recognized consumer brand." The National Journal and the Hotline are blue chip publishing properties for reaching professionals in government and politics--niche brands--but they coveted the broad national reach their partners could bring. Most people saw ElectionLine's URL in the crucial "refers" from the print edition of the Washington Post, which directs people where to find more information. But this key source of publicity, which was plentiful for ElectionLine, didn't transfer to PoliticsNow after the merger. In fact, they virtually came to an end after Washingtonpost.com went online. Says one staffer, "it took a lot of adamant lobbying to get any refers from the Post."

Despite this by most accounts it was a smashing success. In addition to great reviews, the site was generating \$100,000 a month in advertising revenues (from such sponsors as MCI, Sony, CitiBank and McDonnell Douglas). It averaged about 1 million hits/day, which translated into about 150,000 page views and somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 daily visitors. The mailing list reached 15,000 people. Presidential candidate Lamar Alexander and Republican National Committee chair Haley Barbour were guests for live chats. To push the envelope, PoliticsNow experimented with an online discussion group called the Budget Committee. Participants debated for months to come up with a budget proposal which, after a virtual hearing, was put up for a vote. "This is the best of what the Web can do," says Hull. "Will there ever be tens of thousands of people who want to participate in such a thing? I don't know, but it was great for the 100 or so people who participated."

Just before the election the site was getting about 30,000 to 40,000 daily visitors. Says Hull, "It's like sports. Lots of people only pay attention to baseball during the World Series. There were many more people in the last few weeks, so one has to assume that they were casual users and not political professionals." Users swamped the service on election night.

Changing the team

The advertising contracts were cleverly negotiated to continue through the inauguration in mid-January, so the steep decline in usage after the election--to about half of the fall figures--wasn't a deathblow. In December the partners renewed their financial commitments of up to \$500,000 each for 1997. Then, after the turn of the year, there were two big changes in the lineup.

Red Herring
Column: The Internet Coroner's Report

The Death of PoliticsNow: Congenital Defects or Infanticide?

by David Lytel
6 August 1997

Picture the funeral for PoliticsNow, which in its brief but glorious life was the premier non-partisan political Web site. Its parents were blue bloods of American media: The Washington Post Company, ABC News, and the National Journal, which is the weekly publication of record for the business of politics and government. If you could imagine the funeral, the people from the Post would be sitting on one side of the aisle, looking grave but not crying, assuring one another that the young business was gravely ill and its death was, sadly, only a matter of time.

On the other side of the aisle would be most of the two dozen people who worked on the site, as well as the folks from National Journal. They'd be sobbing and glaring across the aisle, whispering darkly to one another about the Post's role in the death of their child. ABC would sit on the same side of the aisle, not crying, keeping an eye on the door in case any bad publicity or lawsuits threatened to break out. After the service one of the more high-strung members of the former staff would break down and scream at an officer of the Post: "You always loved Washingtonpost.com more! As soon as you had a service carrying your brand name you didn't print another "refer" from the newspaper to PoliticsNow! You brand bully! You murderer!" The reception would break up shortly thereafter. Every now and then a flash of tension would flare up at the Major Media Country Club, but life among the big brands would go on.

Origins of the Tragedy

During the height of the Web hype in 1995 two big commercial, non-partisan political Web sites were launched. The National Journal began working with American Political Network (APN), which publishes the only newsletter that matters for campaign professionals called the Hotline. Neither had any experience in online publishing, but thought the election year was a good opportunity, so in September 1995 they launched PoliticsUSA.

Similar thinking was underway at the Washington Post and ABC, which together launched ElectionLine in December. But while the National Journal was starting fresh on the Web, the two other companies had already spent a lot of money trying to find an online niche. ABC was on AOL, but not yet on the Web, and the Washington Post had lost who knows how much on a private label service on AT&T Interchange. For ABC and the Post, ElectionLine was an experiment, a way to test the Web.

ElectionLine was oriented on breaking news, while PoliticsUSA offered depth and analysis. But the differences didn't matter as much in early 1996 as the similar situation they were in. They were going after the same advertisers, and neither was making money. Since their editorial

Filename: death of politics now 1997.doc
Directory: /Users/davidlytel/Desktop/contents of the Vault
Template: /Users/davidlytel/Library/Group
Containers/UBF8T346G9.Office/User
Content.localized/Templates.localized/Normal.dotm
Title:
Subject:
Author: David Lytel
Keywords:
Comments:
Creation Date: 3/17/09 11:58:00 AM
Change Number: 6
Last Saved On: 3/17/09 12:11:00 PM
Last Saved By: David Lytel
Total Editing Time: 10 Minutes
Last Printed On: 5/13/26 2:00:00 PM
As of Last Complete Printing
Number of Pages: 4
Number of Words: 1,656
Number of Characters: 8,587 (approx.)