

Second life

After 100 years as a daily, the *Christian Science Monitor* reinvents itself for the Internet Age **BY DAN KENNEDY**

SOMETIME THIS APRIL, one of New England's most venerable daily newspapers will cease to be a daily newspaper.

The *Christian Science Monitor*, which marked its 100th anniversary this past November, is beginning its second century as a multi-platform, multimedia news organization. Central to this new identity will be its free website, CSMonitor.com, begun a dozen years ago and now freed from the constraints of the daily print cycle. The website, in turn, will be supplemented by a daily email edition and a weekly, subscriber-supported magazine.

Though the transformation has long been anticipated, it nevertheless represents a signal moment for the five-days-a-week paper, whose circulation exceeded 230,000 at its peak in the early 1970s. (It's currently around 55,000.) A few small, local papers have abandoned their daily print editions, but the *Monitor* is the first national paper to do so.

Overseeing the change is editor John Yemma, a *Monitor* alumnus who returned to the paper last summer after nearly two decades at the *Boston Globe*, most recently as multimedia editor. Quiet and thoughtful, Yemma, 56, says he is determined to lead the paper into a Web-driven future while remaining true to the ideals of the Christian Science Church's founder, Mary Baker Eddy, who launched the *Monitor* in 1908 with a mission "to injure no man, but bless all mankind."

"I would define *Monitor* journalism as the journalism of hope," says Yemma. "It's not just about shocking you or titillating you. It's about essentially coming away with the sense that it's not all going to hell in a handbasket. The value added is not to try to solve the problem ourselves, but to find people who are trying to solve the problem."

Even though CSMonitor.com, with some 1.5 million unique monthly users, has overshadowed the print edition for quite a few years, its content has mostly mirrored what's on paper—that is, yesterday's news, written for subscribers whose *Monitor* shows up in the mail a day or two later. No longer. And that gives Yemma a chance to be timely in a way that just hasn't been possible before.

"It gets us in the game of being relevant," Yemma says of the new strategy. "We're online when an event is happening with the news and the analysis, and with that particular *Monitor* perspective. We are in the moment of the event happening, of the news breaking."

Small though the *Monitor* may be, observers in the newspaper business are watching the transformation closely—not only because of the *Monitor's* reputation (seven Pulitzer Prizes since its founding), but because the paper finds itself at the intersection of several important trends.

By combining a free website with a weekly magazine that will cost \$89 a year, the *Monitor* is seeking new ways of melding print and online. The plan is a slight dialing-back from the Internet-only model often espoused by new-media types, and also a possible blueprint for revenue-starved newspaper executives.

Just as important, the *Monitor's* success or failure will be seen as a test for nonprofit ownership at a time when large, for-profit corporations—including the New York Times Co., which owns the *Globe*—are downsizing their papers and shrinking their journalistic portfolios.

TO BE SURE, the move to a mostly online future should be less daunting for the *Monitor* than it would be for a typical for-profit paper.

Vin Crosbie, an online-news consultant who teaches at Syracuse University and blogs at Digital-Deliverance.com, says the problem facing newspapers is that ditching their paper editions would save them 40 percent of their costs but deprive them of 90 percent of their revenue, since online advertising isn't nearly as lucrative as print advertising. That's less of an obstacle for the *Monitor*, since its print edition is already nearly ad-free.

"This is something these guys should have done long ago," says Crosbie. "It is already an online newspaper, primarily."

The challenge the Christian Science Church has set for the *Monitor* is also relatively modest: to lose

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less money than it does now. According to an account in the *Monitor* itself, the paper is expected to lose \$18.9 million during the 12-month period that ends on April 30, with \$12.1 million of that being paid for in the form of a direct subsidy from the church. (The remainder of the deficit will be covered by the *Monitor*'s endowment and by contributions.) By 2013, the goal is to bring the loss down to \$10.5 million and the church's subsidy to \$3.7 million, though Yemma hopes to do better than that.

“The thing I would like to achieve is to get off of the deficit totally, because I think that fosters editorial independence and competitive journalism in a good way,” Yemma says. “I'd love us to get to the point where we could actually return some money to the church. That would do wonders psychologically for everybody because it would show that *Monitor* journalism isn't just a good thing to do, but it's a successful thing.”

Yemma's path to financial stability depends on the *Monitor*'s achieving some ambitious goals: pushing the readership of CSMonitor.com from about 1.5 million unique users per month to about 5 million (roughly the same level as the *Globe*'s Boston.com site) and building paid circulation of the weekly *Monitor* to 80,000 or 90,000. At the same time, *Monitor* executives are preparing to cut their 95-person staff by 10 percent to 15 percent.

The plans for boosting the online and print readership numbers are interdependent. The weekly—to be the size of a Sunday-newspaper magazine, printed on high-quality, non-glossy stock—is intended as a home for the longer perspective pieces that have always been a hallmark of the *Monitor*. But in a deviation from standard new-media thinking, the weekly itself will not be posted online. Instead, the articles will be split off from the magazine and posted on relevant Web pages of CSMonitor.com.

For instance, let's say there's a breaking-news story involving Russia. Readers of CSMonitor.com will come across coverage of that event, as well as related stories that would include any long pieces about Russia published in the weekly *Monitor*. The idea, if it works, is to give readers an incentive to pay for the weekly, but at the same time use the in-depth weekly journalism to supplement breaking news on the website.

AT THE MOMENT, Yemma says, about 84 percent of CSMonitor.com readers come in through search engines, aggregators, blogs, and the like, and they generally stay just long enough to read the story they were looking for. Yemma hopes to entice them into sticking around—not just through the *Monitor*'s journalism, but by building an online community via discussion forums, user-participation projects (example: reader-submitted fall-foliage pictures from around the world), and social-networking platforms such

Monitor editor John Yemma says the online model “gets us in the game of being relevant.”



as Facebook and Twitter.

Another approach that Yemma talks about is intelligent aggregation—putting together roundups, with links, of coverage by other news organizations that meet the *Monitor*'s standards, as it already does with its Terrorism & Security blog. Steve Outing, a new-media consultant who blogs at SteveOuting.com, is an advocate of that approach, and says the paper's elite audience could make CSMonitor.com an ideal platform “for more serious

The *Monitor* once thrived as a serious alternative to yellow journalism.

discussion” of issues and news.

All this is a fairly significant change in orientation for the *Monitor*. Yemma himself admits there's some danger his reporters will start chasing after breaking news at the expense of the perspective and analysis for which the paper

is known, though he's optimistic that trap can be avoided.

Patrik Jonsson, who covers the American South for the *Monitor*, says via email that he's looking forward to the change with both trepidation and anticipation.

“In some of our confabs about this move, there has been concern about how to transfer our more level-headed approach to a 24/7 on-time news cycle—and I share that concern, as well, to some extent,” says Jonsson, who's been at the paper for the better part of a decade.

Karla Vallance, the *Monitor*'s managing editor for electronic publishing from 1998 to 2006, calls Yemma “brilliant” and “a great person to have there.” Still, she warns that the new direction won't succeed without a clearly defined mission.

“I think the newspaper has just dropped from sight in people's minds, at least anybody below the age of 40,” says Vallance, who now teaches journalism at Emerson College.

“There needs to be a reason for people to go there and go there every day. The *Monitor* needs to decide what it wants to be now. And it has not really decided yet.”

WHEN MARY BAKER EDDY founded the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1908, she knew very well what she wanted it to be: a high-quality alternative to the yellow journalism of its day.

Eddy was appalled by the state of newspapering. According to the legendary *Monitor* editor Erwin Canham's 1958 history of the paper, *Commitment to Freedom*, Eddy laid the groundwork in 1896, writing: “Looking over the newspapers of the day, one naturally reflects that it is dangerous to live, so loaded with disease seems the very air.... A periodical of our own will counteract to some extent this public nuisance.”

For the first 70 years of its existence, the *Monitor* thrived as a serious alternative to that nuisance. There was no national edition of the *New York Times*, no Internet, and, in many parts of the country, no local paper devoted to serious coverage of national and international affairs. After

its circulation peaked in the 1970s, though, the *Monitor* entered a long period of retrenchment, switching from broadsheet to tabloid and losing both pages and readers. The church also lost a reported \$300 million on a failed television venture in the late 1980s.

Despite its relatively small readership, the *Monitor* has maintained a robust staff. It continues to operate eight foreign bureaus, which is eight more than the *Globe* and many other large regional papers have. (It also has eight US-based bureaus as well as a Washington bureau.) The *Monitor* won a Pulitzer in 1996 for David Rohde's reporting on the killing fields of Srebrenica, in Bosnia. *Monitor* cartoonist Clay Bennett won the paper's most recent Pulitzer, in 2002.

The *Monitor*'s last sustained moment in the national spotlight came in 2006, when Jill Carroll, a stringer who was covering the war in Iraq, was taken hostage by a terrorist group and later released. Her 11-part series on her ordeal still occupies a prominent position on CSMonitor.com. But though the *Monitor* rewarded her with a staff position, Carroll left the business in order to become a firefighter.

Yemma's first stint at the *Monitor* came during a time when the paper was shrinking. A native of Austin, Texas,

and a graduate of the University of Texas, Yemma worked for the *San Antonio Express-News* (he left not long after Rupert Murdoch made it his first American acquisition) and the *Dallas Morning News*. A Christian Scientist himself, he joined the *Monitor*'s Washington bureau in 1979 after his wife, Robin Jareaux, an art director, took a job with the *Washington Post*. He later worked as a foreign correspondent, covering Beirut during Lebanon's civil war

It continues to operate eight foreign bureaus.

in the 1980s, and then worked in Boston as the *Monitor*'s business editor.

He departed from the *Monitor* in 1989 in the aftermath of the *Monitor* Television fiasco, joining the *Globe* to work as a reporter, foreign editor, Sunday editor, and, finally, as multimedia editor. As a reporter, Yemma helped cover stories ranging from stolen objects from Guatemala at the Museum of Fine Arts (he recalls his foray into the Guatemalan jungle as having "a real Tintin quality to it") to the exploitation of schizophrenic men and women by unscrupulous researchers. But it was as an editor that he



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CSMonitor.com has long overshadowed the newspaper.

made his strongest impression.

“John Yemma was a great editor and exactly the kind of calm and wise voice you would want to hear on the other end of the phone when you are in the middle of a conflict operating on lots of adrenalin and little sleep,” emails former *Globe* foreign correspondent Charles Sennott, now the executive editor and vice president of GlobalPost.com, a fledgling international-news organization based in Boston. (Both Yemma and Sennott say the *Monitor* and GlobalPost

will share some resources in foreign coverage.)

YEMMA SAYS HE knows he faces a difficult challenge, but he exudes a sense of calm optimism. Wearing a black polo shirt, a black T-shirt, and a tweed sports coat, the bearded, bespectacled Yemma amiably gives a tour of the *Monitor*'s refurbished newsroom, in a long, horizontal building across a brick walkway from the Mother Church, then settles in for a 90-minute interview in the church cafeteria.

He leads a quiet life. Yemma and his wife moved from Jamaica Plain to Plymouth a few years ago; he leaves the house before 6 a.m. in order to beat the traffic. They have no children; they garden; they enjoy their dogs.

Yemma talks with eloquence and feeling about the role that Christian Science has played in his life and his work. Potentially, at least, it's a touchy subject. The *Monitor* is a secular paper, save for one religious article that is published each day in accordance with Eddy's will. Yet church influence has been an issue off and on over the years. (Canham, in *Commitment to Freedom*, writes of cigarettes being airbrushed out of photographs and of dead horses being described as having “passed.”)

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fairly high level of thinking about the metaphysics of Christian Science, or the theology of Christian Science, truth is actually a synonym for God,” Yemma says. “As a journalist, that always appealed to me. And the idea of knowing things without being buffeted too much by emotion or sensation or, essentially, what in Christian Science would be called the material senses—knowing them in a clear way is the route to at least facing the problem and praying about it, and healing it. So the central role of the *Monitor* is that clarity of vision.”

Amid a cacophony of media voices, where, exactly, does the *Christian Science Monitor* fit in? Mark Jurkowitz, a former *Globe* reporter who’s now the associate director of the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, in Washington, thinks the *Monitor* might have exactly what news consumers are looking for, but he wonders if the *Monitor* brand has gotten too small for anyone to notice.

“In some ways, you could argue that it does occupy a niche that many people actually think is the future niche for newspapers—forgetting about the rush of instant, daily reporting, because everybody in the world is going to beat you on that,” says Jurkowitz.

“It’s an elite publication that takes an in-depth, broader

look at issues for a more sophisticated audience,” adds Jurkowitz, who was a paid contributor to the *Monitor* Television experiment. “Editorially, what they’re doing may now fit the times. The problem is, who knows about them?”

Point taken. Yet it’s possible that the *Monitor*’s lack of visibility may be less of a hindrance than Jurkowitz supposes. In an era of many small media players, there’s no reason that the *Monitor* can’t maintain its position as a unique, respected alternative. Its optimistic, forward-looking view of the world is different not only from the straight-news approach of mainstream organizations but also from the opinion-mongering that marks—and mars—much of contemporary discourse, from blogland to cable news.

“I think the niche is this idea of constructive or solution-oriented journalism. That’s the real niche,” says Yemma. “What we think is that there’s a share of the market that we can reach because of our unique—sorry, I work with marketing people, so these things kind of seep over—our unique value proposition, as it’s called. And that’s *Monitor* journalism. People will want us for that.” **CW**

Dan Kennedy, an assistant professor of journalism at Northeastern University, can be reached at da.kennedy@neu.edu. He blogs at medianation.blogspot.com.

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