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Can Web 3.0 save the publishing industry?

The Semantic evolution of Web publishing could cut costs, save time, and increase ad revenue

Technology trends and news by [Tony Shaw](#)

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In a favorite episode of the popular sitcom, *The Office*, branch manager Michael Scott insists to a classroom full of business students, “Real business is done on paper. Write that down.”

The camera quickly pans to a classroom full of students typing Michael’s words into their laptops. A company whose business, like Michael’s, traditionally relies so heavily upon the printed page might watch this scene and cringe.

After all, more and more people are canceling their newspaper subscriptions in favor of free Internet news feeds. Readers who used to love the feel of a hardback novel in their hand are now starting to favor the convenience of a lightweight Kindle. And shoppers who used to flip through their favorite magazines for the latest trends are beginning to simply log on to Facebook to get suggestions on fashion, entertainment, and pretty much anything else you can imagine from their virtual social networks.



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In an increasingly paperless world, does the publishing industry stand a chance?

Absolutely. Michael claims that business is done on paper, and the essence of his words remains true: commerce cannot occur without text-based marketing, agreements, receipts, descriptions, accounts, branding, resources, et cetera, et cetera. It's just that these business essentials are no longer paper-based—they are organized, utilized and optimized through the ever-improving *semantic web*, also known as *Web 3.0*.

If publishers would utilize Web 3.0 to get their news feeds online, their products on Kindle and their brands splashed across Facebook—all with greater organization, reach, and cost-effectiveness—publishers would find that the essence of their business model is not changing for the worse, but their revenues (or current lack thereof) certainly can change for the better.

Publishers who want to get on top need to recognize that the Web is evolving into an increasingly *linked cloud of data* which we call Web 3.0. Currently, we understand the World Wide Web mostly as a large a collection of documents. We query the information we need, really fast computers do the search for us, and in no time at all, we get back a long list of documents that might have the information we asked for. Then we have to take over again to do the final part of the search ourselves. This paradigm has worked well so far, but as the amount of information grows and we get overwhelmed by the number of options, we will need computers to step up to the challenge and do more of the filtering and sorting work for us. This is where the semantic Web comes in.



The semantic Web extends the paradigm of the World Wide Web beyond recognizing an endless collection of documents to understanding the *meaning* of the information contained within those documents. We humans may not make much of a distinction between *recognizing* and *understanding*—the two typically go hand-in-hand for us—but this semantic shift towards understanding in the Web has an immense impact on how computers do their jobs and even what jobs they're able to do.

The semantic evolution of the Web necessitates an evolution in business, and particularly in publishing. As Michael Scott insists, the essence of the business has not changed and will not change, but with the on-set of Web 3.0, the practicalities and the possibilities of publishing will evolve dramatically. Dying newspapers and fading magazines can find new life—not to mention, new *revenue*—through the semantic Web.

Branding, for example, will remain essential to any publication's success, and Web 3.0 will only improve the ways in which a brand is shaped and utilized. The expansion of e-commerce means more competition from more outlets than ever before, so smart publishers should turn to semantic technologies to establish and market their brand to their target audience with more efficiency and effectiveness than previously possible. Publishers can use *rich data services*, for example, to identify key concepts within their publication's site and associated sites and help them find additional content and resources to enrich their material. Likewise, semantically-driven *advanced media monitoring* can be utilized to help a publisher stay up to date on current trends and interests within their customer base in order to adjust their brand according to those trends.

Another business essential that will always hold true is the old formula, revenue minus cost equals profit. The costs have simply grown too high for many traditional publishers--newspapers in particular--to stay afloat, but semantic technologies can help publishers reduce costs from within and without. A perfect example is semantically-driven *machine-assisted tagging* which allows publishers to organize and utilize internal research, accounting, databases, etc, much more quickly and thoroughly than a human cataloger ever could, thereby decreasing overhead while increasing productivity. Thus publishers are free to put their *human* resources toward much more imaginative tasks that will better serve business development.

The Semantic Web can also save publishers from the crushing weight of one of their largest burdens: advertising. On the sales side of things, semantic technologies can greatly reduce advertising costs by precisely targeting a publication's key demographics. When ads are dispersed across the Web, *semantic ad targeting* identifies a site's content, mood, and context in order to determine whether those ads are an ideal fit. This means that, for example, an ad for a murder mystery novel will show up on a fan page dedicated to the genre, but it won't show up next to a news feed of a recent homicide.

Likewise, publishers can (and really, *must*) utilize Web 3.0 to connect to customers through semantically-linked social networks like Facebook and Twitter. The amount of time spent on social sites jumped 82% from December 2008 to December 2009 according to a Nielson study. With so many people sifting through person-to-person buzz on the Web, publishers must turn to *semantic publishing tools* to create content with built-in semantic capabilities that allow their content to be more searchable, and just as importantly, more sharable. Additionally, *semantic mark-up tools* allow content to remain easily accessible as the Web continues to fragment across more and more devices such as phones, tablets, gaming devices, and even as-yet unimagined platforms.

When delivering digital content to new platforms, "It's not enough to just take the same old content and reformat it for different screen sizes," says Rachel Lovinger, author of *Nimble: A Razorfish Report on Publishing in the Digital Age*. "We need to design content products that take into account how people interact with each device and provide a unique, engaging experience on that platform."

It's still an essential truth of business: you have to spend money to make money. But with the onset of Web 3.0, publishers can spend less and make more by evolving their product while simultaneously remaining true to their brand, increasing productivity while decreasing overhead, and expanding their reach while at the same time focusing their audience. The possibilities are here. Now it's up to publishers to grab hold of the Web 3.0 life raft, sail out of the red, and cruise into the black.

To learn more about semantic publishing, read [Nimble: A Razorfish Report on Publishing in the Digital Age](#) by Rachel Lovinger.

Written by Tony Shaw, publisher of the [Semantic Universe](#) journal, and educational program chair of [SemTech](#), the world's largest semantic technology conference. Shaw has broad expertise in the assessment of emerging technologies and facilitates the elite [TTI/Vanguard](#) strategy forum for CTOs.

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