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“Something to Talk About” on Your Web Site

For more information:

Todd McCauley

Mary Nesbitt, m-nesbitt@northwestern.edu, 847-467-4285

In the overview report from the New Readers study, we suggest that part of your innovation around the “something to talk about” experience could be a Web site, targeted to younger adults who like to discuss news.

Here’s what we’re thinking, in more detail. (If you like this idea, let’s talk. Even if you don’t like it, let us know why.)

Debatables.com

What is it? A Web log on which a handful of writers/editors scan and post news from a variety of sources along with their own commentary.

In addition, a number of features (described below) solicit interaction and feedback, along with participation in various contests.

Purpose: To provide a place for a segment of young readers to have something to talk about and to feel they’re getting smarter about topics of interest to them. Debatables.com becomes a “must read” every day because it makes the news of the day more intriguing, fun and approachable.

Target: People who like to discuss current events and their implications. We target 18-34-year-olds, but won’t necessarily market exclusively to that group. Administrators and contributors tend to be young (18-34), with diverse viewpoints and demographics to ensure varied content.

Proposed Features of the Site



Forecast the future

We invite readers to predict how upcoming events will turn out. Each day, blog administrators post a series of questions, with links to related stories. The questions, (circa June 2004) might include:

A standard set of classifications automatically comes up with a person's username, based on percentage of correct predictions.

100%	Absolutely Perfect
90-99%	Nostradamus
75-89%	Better than the professionals
60-74%	Worth hiring
45-59%	Better than picking answers out of a hat
30-44%	Take my comments with a grain of salt
29% or less	Seldom right but never in doubt

The site has a link that lists people's user name, number of correct predictions, number of predictions attempted, with links to all comments made on any section by that person.

Next Year's Trends

Readers play futurist by predicting ideas, companies, products or themes that aren't mainstream now, but they think are destined to become so. In June 2004, these were potential items:

- Google's Gmail
- Adult dodge ball leagues
- Choose your own adventure television
- Greek mythology
- Religious divide of America
- Citizen journalism

Five years ago, these would have been good candidates (In existence, but not top of mainstream mind yet.)

- Google
- Downloading music off the Internet
- Reality TV shows
- Blogs
- Home schooling
- Arabic/Middle East culture



You make the call

This section includes articles and commentary featuring tough decisions faced by political, judicial, military or pop-culture decision-makers. Readers are asked to explain how they would make the decision. Each story includes a poll so readers can see what other readers think. Here are some examples (again, relevant in June 2004):

- You are President Bush. Do you hand Saddam Hussein over to the new Iraqi government?
- You are a Legislator. Should the U.S. create “do not spam” legislation?
- You are a Supreme Court Justice. Should “under God” be taken from the pledge of allegiance?
- You are Michael Eisner. What should Disney do about Fahrenheit 9/11?
- You are Michael Jackson’s lawyer. What is your legal strategy?
- Al Qaeda just kidnapped an American in Saudi Arabia and gives you 72 hours to release known terrorists held as prisoners. What do you do?

Technical Implications: Posting responses to this section requires registration. Anyone can read what other readers say, but only registered users can post responses. Again, posts are collected to the user’s personal “folder” so they can be retrieved later. One of the regular features would be to post every week the names and comments of people whose decisions matched the actual outcomes.



Gimme a break! (or, Oh... please!!)

This section points out obvious and not so obvious spins that writers and public figures put on current events. The writer/editor links to a story and shares his or her analysis of the spin. Readers are invited to do likewise and rate the story for its spin. Based on the stories selected, there’s a weekly winner for the biggest spin and a reigning all-time winner for most votes cast.

As an example:

The Boston Herald reports Friday that Teresa Heinz, wife of Democratic Presidential hopeful John Kerry, has changed her voter registration from Republican to Democrat.

"There's no room for tolerance within the party anymore," Heinz was quoted as telling the Herald. She also complained of a "rigid" right-wing orthodoxy by the party.

Heinz said she was a Republican when she married Kerry in 1995. But she became disenchanted with the personal nature of Republican attacks and ultimately realized the party had changed into something she could no longer support.



Gimme a break! “Became disenchanted ... ultimately realized the party had changed?” I guess the fact that her husband is running for president as a Democrat has nothing to do with it. Why not just say, “John and I talked about it and he wouldn’t change parties, so I did. But it’s just to keep the marriage together.”

Others will come to her defense and a lively (moderated) discussion will ensue.

Quick takes

Site editors/writers post intriguing or startling headlines (with links to the story) and ask people to share their thoughts in 100 words or less. Here are some examples

- Clinton claims impeachment is a badge of honor.
- Rumsfeld ordered prisoners hidden from Red Cross.
- 9/11 panel: U.S. unprepared 'in every respect.'
- Rush Limbaugh demonstrates the sanctity of marriage by ending his.
- How Reagan changed the GOP forever.

Surprising, but true

Readers vote on the most interesting story of the day; the person who submitted it wins a prize. Here are some examples from the realm of actual stories:

- Man wins annual man-versus-horse race for the first time in its 25-year history.
- Man scares off robbers by faking seizure.
- Plastic surgery can now give men "six-pack."
- Nebraska considering cat-leash law.
- Man mugs students whilst wearing shirt with his name on it.
- 14-year-old chicken certified world's oldest.
- Horse murderer turns out to be another horse.

Other Benefits of debatables.com

- **Research:** This blog will help assess the market for “talk about it” news, and for a Web site shaped around that approach to news. Administrators can track hits, sessions, comments, votes, etc., without requiring registration. By requiring registration (zip code, year of birth, gender) to vote and make comments, administrators can track demographics for interest in various topics and treatments. In essence it is a kind of real-time laboratory for better understanding what and how to get younger adults talking about news. The results give insight into what kinds of content and approach work with them. And some features that might ultimately work in the newspaper are much easier to experiment with first online.
- **Revenue:** In addition to traditional advertising opportunities, sponsorships could also be sold for various sections.