

Dusting Off the Archive for the Web

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Visitors to the Sports Illustrated Web site will be able to check out the George Steinbrenner cover story from 1993, along with Magic Johnson in 1991 and Casey Stengel and Yogi Berra in 1964.

As magazines and newspapers hunt for the new thing they need to be to thrive in the Internet era, some find that part of the answer lies in the old thing they used to be.

Publications are rediscovering their archives, like a person learning that a hand-me-down coffee table is a valuable antique. For magazines and newspapers with long histories, especially, old material can be reborn on the Web as an inexpensive way to attract readers, advertisers and money.

Sports Illustrated, which faces fierce daily, even hourly, competition with ESPN, Yahoo Sports and others, has something its main rivals do not: a 53-year trove of articles and photos, most of it from an era when the magazine dominated the field of long-form sports writing and color sports photography.

On Thursday, the magazine will introduce the Vault, a free site within SI.com that contains all the words Sports Illustrated has ever published and many of the images, along with video and other material, in a searchable database.

SI.com already draws more than six million unique visitors each month, according to Nielsen Online (publications insist that the true numbers are much higher than Nielsen's ratings), and executives of the magazine predict the Vault could add five million monthly readers.

"The real hidden value of this is what it does for search," said John Squires, executive vice president of Time Inc., the Time Warner subsidiary that publishes Sports Illustrated. The move quadruples the site's volume, he said. "We'll have to work our way up the search algorithms over time, but eventually, someone searches Johnny Unitas, and SI.com is going to pop up."

Many publications, including most major magazines, still offer little or no archive access online. And of those that do allow readers to look deep into their histories, many charge for it, like The Washington Post or The Atlantic Monthly, whose online archives both go back to the 19th century.

But a growing number of publications are opening their own vaults — if only partially — or dropping pay requirements, and they say it makes a big difference in attracting readers.

Industry executives say that although old articles attract less interest from advertisers than current ones, any increase matters at a time when many newspapers and magazines are

struggling to hold onto print ad revenue. They say that while building an archive for readers is time-consuming, it is not prohibitively expensive — people at some major magazines gave estimates in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. The material is already available, and the databases cost very little to operate.

Mark Ford, president of the Sports Illustrated Group at Time, said the Vault was expected to account for 5 percent of the magazine's online revenue in its first year, and more in the future.

Popular Mechanics, a Hearst magazine, says about 35 percent of its online readers enter the site through a free archive that contains printed content back to the mid-1990s, and 15 percent enter through Web-only material.

The company does not share specific financial information, but James B. Meigs, editor in chief of Popular Mechanics, said, "we get good ad revenue from this traffic," in part because it invites the reader to linger, digging more deeply into a particular topic.

Until recently, Newsweek.com opened its archives only to people who subscribed to the print magazine or who paid an online fee, and content reached back to only 2000. "All it did was limit people's interest in even looking at our archives," said Deidre Depke, editor of Newsweek.com.

Last fall, the magazine — part of the Washington Post Company — made its online collection of past articles free and easier to navigate, and expanded it to go back to 1990; Web traffic to the archive quadrupled. Next month, it will add articles from 1975 through 1989, and then work will begin on everything back to the magazine's founding in 1933.

"It's an incredibly difficult project because we have to open up old computer files of every story, correct errors, change the coding, add computer tags," Ms. Depke said. And issues from before the digital era have to be scanned, page by page.

For two years, The New York Times allowed only print subscribers and people who paid an online fee to read its editorials and columnists or to delve into the archive. Last September, it ended the pay requirement and made most articles accessible back to the mid-19th century.

Since then, search traffic to archive pages has more than doubled, and the archives now represent 10 percent of the page views on NYTimes.com, said Diane McNulty, a spokeswoman.

Time Inc. has been ahead of this curve; two of its publications, People and Entertainment Weekly, give access to articles going back about a decade.

A few years ago, Time magazine put every issue cover and every article it had published, back to its founding in 1923, online free, though that feature is not prominent on the Web site.

Like most publications' online archives, Time's has few pictures, which can be more difficult to scan and store than articles, and often have thorny copyright issues. When news with a historical angle breaks, the magazine can put together a page on the subject using old and new articles, which the company says makes the archive more attractive to advertisers.

But the Sports Illustrated project, three years in the making, goes several steps further. It includes many of the magazine's photos, along with links to related video on other sites.

The Vault's search engine lets a reader search by athlete, coach, team, sport, decade and year. Want to see every Sports Illustrated cover with Magic Johnson, or all the articles that mentioned him in 1986? Easy.

The site also allows a reader to see high-resolution images of old issues of the magazine as it appeared in physical form, including ads, using a mouse to "turn" pages. Jeff Price, president of SI Digital, said, "We're confident that there's nothing else like this."

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