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True/Slant: Angling for News Sponsors

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By Howard Kurtz
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Hours after an Air France jet disappeared over the Atlantic last Monday, Miles O'Brien, dismissing "the often inaccurate reporting on aviation that is so prevalent in the mainstream media," offered some informed analysis.

"It was a dark and stormy night -- in a place that is home to the world's worst thunderstorms," he said. O'Brien noted that the Airbus A330 had a good record and "the crew had 'Sully-esque' seasoning."

But O'Brien wasn't reporting for CNN, which dumped him in December. He was posting on True/Slant, a Web site that is mapping a new relationship between journalists, readers and advertisers. In fact, O'Brien has already contacted such aerospace companies as Boeing and Lockheed Martin to sponsor his work at another site, and plans to do so for True/Slant.

If he had done that at CNN, says O'Brien, "I'd be fired, are you kidding?"

Lewis Dvorkin, founder of the site, which officially launches today after a trial run, makes no apologies for throwing out the old model. "It's tailored for the entrepreneurial journalist," he says. "We're enabling and empowering journalists to develop their own brand."

Dvorkin is a media veteran who has worked for the New York Times, Newsweek, Wall Street Journal, Forbes, AOL and TMZ.com. He is backed by $3 million in funding from Forbes Media and Fuse Capital. True/Slant has 100 contributors, and unlike, say, the Huffington Post, where most writers blog for free, everyone is compensated in some form. "While it's not a lot of money, it's at least validating the worth of the journalism," says Diane Dimond, a veteran television correspondent who is one of the site's most prolific bloggers.

"I'm a believer," says O'Brien, whose Air France coverage drew 15,000 hits last week. "I haven't made any money off it yet, but I think there's something there." Still, he says, "you could easily get very cozy with your sources. You've got to watch that if you're calling people up asking for money. It is uncharted territory for the likes of me."

While some contributors receive a stipend, others have an equity stake or a share in advertising revenue that they solicit. Dvorkin says such contacts with advertisers would be disclosed and that True/Slant editors would step in if a writer tried to post inappropriate material about an advertiser. "I come from the land of traditional media standards," he says.

In another departure from the usual practice, companies will be offered their own pages on the Web site, but these would be clearly labeled as advertorials.

The online buzz phrase these days is "building community," as news organizations try to replicate the social success of Facebook. True/Slant contributors blog, put up video and "follow" each other, while readers can follow them and post comments of their own. At one point last week Dimond, who specializes in crime and justice issues, had 13 posts in five days.

"I have my little core group of followers who post comments," she says of her 118 fans. "It's not like the millions of people who watch you on TV, but it's certainly more personal. This is like an everyday conversation with a community that's interested in what I'm interested in. That's kind of cool."

Some contributors allow more personal glimpses of their lives than in other media venues.

"Suddenly I'm willing to reveal a little more," says ABC's Claire Shipman. "Blogging seems to be more personal. You find yourself saying, 'Should I really be saying that?,' and then you click 'publish.' " The mother of two says on the site that her biggest regret is "not starting the breeding process earlier. I think I'd have a few more." She recalls the time that "I locked my son in our car when he was 2 outside of a Chinese food restaurant and could not get him out for an hour and had to make funny faces and noises all the while wanting to scream and cry."

Shipman, who is married to Jay Carney, now an aide to Vice President Biden, also reveals: "I told my current husband I'd be happy to use the wedding ring from my first marriage. I'm not sentimental. He said no."

Shipman and BBC's Katty Kay launched their page to promote their new book, "Womenomics." "We are looking to start a conversation," Shipman says, "and in this new Internet world, you really have to branch out and put your tentacles in a million different places. What True/Slant offers is a different audience than the 'Good Morning America' audience."

Despite its name, True/Slant has no obvious slant, with contributors from the left and right. They range from Rolling Stone's Matt Taibbi to Reason editor in chief Matt Welch to former New York Times business writer Claudia Deutsch, who confesses to "an all-consuming hatred for banks that is, I know, irrational." (Try saying that in the Times!) Denise Restauri writes "Tween Girl Confidential" and, her

profile notes, is married to Dvorkin.

The result is an eclectic, sometimes scattershot mix that explores culture as much as politics. Some recent headlines: "Dear Roland Burris: Stop Embarrassing Black People." "What Obama Should and Shouldn't Say to the Muslim World." "Is Single Motherhood (By Choice) Selfish?" "What's the Dopiest Gimmick in Rock?" With virtually no promotion, True/Slant drew more than 250,000 unique visitors last month, according to Google Analytics. It is tiny -- run by six people from an office in Manhattan's SoHo district -- and could turn out to be a flash in the digital pan.

With newspapers and magazines laying off and shutting down, journalists are increasingly turning to the Web to promote themselves and their niche. Rather than toil for a single corporation, some are doing a little of everything: blogging, book-writing, TV-guesting and Twittering. That means sites such as True/Slant will spread like viruses, mutating into different forms.

For traditional journalists, the unaccustomed freedom is both liberating and daunting.

"Nobody assigns me stories," O'Brien says. "I post stuff and nobody edits me. If you say something wrong, you will hear about it in 10 seconds flat."

L.A. Romance

Mirthala Salinas, an anchor for the Telemundo station in Los Angeles, lost her job last year after having an affair with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. Salinas, who was first suspended, had occasionally covered the mayor, whose marriage broke up while they were an item.

Now Villaraigosa is at it again, dating Lu Parker, an anchor and reporter for KTLA-TV. A former Miss USA, Parker has a Web site that featured a bikini shot (until it was replaced last week by one of her in a dress) and election night video of her interviewing the mayor, who pronounced himself "spellbound" and "mesmerized" -- about Barack Obama's victory. Days before rival KNBC-TV broke the news about the relationship, Parker had read a story on the air about Villaraigosa weighing a run for governor.

KTLA News Director Jason Ball told the Los Angeles Times that "there is no issue" because Parker "doesn't cover politics generally." Really? A mayor is a city's top newsmaker, and Parker, it turns out, hadn't told her bosses about the relationship until it hit the headlines.

Truthiness Edition

It's no accident that the scowling visage of Stephen Colbert, with "Iraq" seemingly carved into his hair, stares out from the cover of Newsweek's new issue. Editor Jon Meacham thought it would be a grand (and buzzworthy) idea to tap the Comedy Central funnyman as a guest editor as Colbert -- to his credit -- was heading to Baghdad for a week of shows to focus attention on American troops there. "Some readers and critics will inevitably object, saying this is a publicity stunt," Meacham concedes in an editor's note. "To them I solemnly say: You are half-right." Sounds like a half-confession for the act of hiring a fake pundit.

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