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**Getting Under Way in New Media:
An Auto-Ethnographic Case Study**

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Noticing the “New Media “ after the “Magazine and...” in this journal’s title reminded me of Jack Turner, the only publisher I’ve worked for who never wore socks. Socks look dumb with boat shoes, and Turner’s Top-Siders may have been permanently attached. At least that’s the way it seemed around the office at *Soundings*, a large-format monthly he co-founded, dedicated to people who sail, race, build, buy, sell, live aboard, or just dream about boats. The magazine turned 47 years old this year, and this summer marks its 15th anniversary on the Web.

In an industry full of business-disaster metaphors—“rough water,” “run aground,” “sprung a leak,” “swamped,” “sunk,” and (especially these days) “bailout”—Turner’s boating magazines stayed afloat and actually rode the crest of a wave onto the Internet. Nautical puns began seeping into my prose in 1989, when I became a staff writer for *Soundings* and its spinoffs—a boating industry B2B monthly called *Soundings Trade Only*, and *Waterfront*, a real estate and lifestyle supplement inspired by occasional “dock, with waterfront house...” ads in *Soundings*’ classifieds. The magazines were based in the quaint Connecticut River town of Essex, where publisher Turner was one of the first members of the Essex Corinthian Yacht Club. Even its founders remember his boat shoes. “He never wore socks, even in the wintertime,” one of them mentioned in *Soundings*’ story about the club’s silver anniversary last year. Regardless of footwear, Turner was a publishing entrepreneur, launching *Soundings* with a few associates over a dining room table, and later starting *Woodshop News* for professional woodworkers, because woodworking was another passion of his.

Boats were not my number one passion, but *Soundings* was only 20 miles from Wesleyan University, where I had just finished a master’s thesis about hypertext writing tools. However, unlike the computer magazines that had been offering just freelance work, *Soundings* had a full-time opening for a staff writer and photographer. I had sailed only a little, but enough to have stories to tell—about a day-sail with my previous boss, a software entrepreneur who sold his company for \$20 million to buy a bigger boat and cruise around the world, and about learning to sail from a sea chantey singer whose band I had written about for the *Hartford Courant*.

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So my application letter told those two stories, and reminded *Soundings* executive editor Christine Born of an argument we'd had about AP style during a literary non-fiction seminar at Wesleyan two years earlier. The reminder may have done the trick, along with the fact that I had no qualms about working with the somewhat shaky Macintosh network *Soundings* had installed the previous year. The system vendor stretched AppleTalk networking to its limits and added a crash-prone software front end to QuarkXPress. Still, reporters had Macintosh SE computers with floppy drives and TeachText; editors had Mac IIs and Quark. For 1988, and for a small company in a boatyard, *Soundings* was impressively high-tech.

In the end, 11 years of newspaper reporting made up for my lack of boating savvy, and I was assigned to cover the New England coast from Rhode Island to Maine. Between monthly trips to Newport or Boston, I upgraded the bulletin board software our bureaus and freelancers used to upload stories over a slow dial-up modem. As a favor, Richard E. Silverman, a math grad student friend at Wesleyan, wrote a program for *Soundings* that converted WordStar documents to a Mac-friendly format. While the newsroom had Macs, the Maryland and Florida bureaus and the publisher himself still used an earlier computing innovation Turner had adopted—Epson models that ran WordStar on either MS-DOS or the earlier CP/M operating system.

Boats and Computers

Soundings' Macintosh network and Turner's 1984 Epson weren't the only signs of technology in the nautical world: From navigation systems to yacht design, computers had been part of the industry for a decade, and, even in a recession, plenty of boat owners still had the disposable income for home computers.

Like Turner, *Soundings*' editor Marleah Ross was open to new ideas, even letting the new staff writer get away with a series of articles that had more to do with cyberspace than salt water. If there's one thing sailors know, it's that you don't get anywhere by standing still. On a sailboat, it's called "steerage way"—you need to be in motion to change direction. (Not to be confused with booking passage "down in steerage" with the Irish musicians on the *Titanic*.) *Soundings* kept moving.

Along with hosting our private bulletin board for story uploads, *Soundings*' modem allowed an editor to dial-up the Associated Press and download breaking news of boating accidents, luxury tax legislation, or other issues of interest to our readers. I brought in my own modem so I could create the monthly AP run-sheets from my desk and connect to my university computer account. Through Wesleyan, I routinely checked boating discussions on Usenet, the big thing in 1980s Internet socializing. I also dialed into boating areas on CompuServe and Prodigy, a home computer network IBM and Sears had launched a year earlier with Connecticut as one of its four trial areas.

Using those networks led me to stories about intercollegiate sailing clubs with e-mail lists, Silicon Valley sailors connecting over a service called the WELL (started in San

Francisco by the Whole Earth Catalog), and a group of boaters in Canada and New York who had linked together their dial-up bulletin boards using a free software system called FidoNet, a non-Internet counterpart to Usenet.

Usenet itself led to a Brown University computer scientist who compiled the recreational boating FAQ file. Back then, Frequently Asked Questions were literally that—topics that had come up in discussion so often that veteran users compiled lists of tried-and-true replies and sent them out again. Usenet's boating discussion area, rec.boats, had everything from regatta results and engine maintenance tips to a list of favorite novels with nautical themes. The one thing it didn't have was advertising: The Internet was for research and education, not for business. It was the law.

To buy or sell a boat, you still had to pick up a copy of *Soundings*, which, inside its glossy color cover with a “thousands of boats for sale” banner, held a newsprint classified ad section the size of a supermarket tabloid. Although founded as a regional publication on Long Island Sound, *Soundings* had grown to include editions on the West Coast, the Great Lakes, Florida, and the Chesapeake Bay, as well as its two Northeastern editions for Long Island Sound and upper New England.

By the early 1990s, a recession and competition from free boat-shopper magazines had forced the company to close its West Coast editions. The eastern ones stayed strong, and the Great Lakes edition held on, written mostly by freelancers and a staff writer in Connecticut. The company already had been thrown a financial life preserver by Don McGraw, a yachtsman with family publishing connections who became co-owner of *Soundings*. The economy was hurting both recreational boaters and the ad-buying pleasure boat industry, so Turner was looking for new sources of income.

Waterfront (subtitled *Life on the Edge*) was one of his ideas, a new free tabloid added to the plastic bag holding *Soundings*' news and classified sections. The magazine used photo-features on phenomenal waterfront homes to entice real estate dealers to buy more of those house-with-dock ads. On the East Coast at least, *Soundings*' thick newsprint brokerage section was to boat shoppers what *Chronicle of Higher Education* ads were to academic job hunters, or *Editor & Publisher*'s ads were to Woodward-and-Bernstein wannabes. (Coincidentally, one of *Soundings*' West Coast competitors for the boating classifieds business became owner of *Editor & Publisher* last year.)

Unlike some newspaper publishers, Turner recognized his classifieds as the gold mine they were. One day he asked what it would take to turn them into a searchable database that customers could dial up on our computer bulletin board—or something like it. Even if readers didn't have computers, he envisioned an 800 number they could use to call a clerk at *Soundings*, who would then do a database search. I had already turned in my resignation, intending to freelance for a year before heading back to graduate school for my doctorate, so Turner hired me as a consultant to research the idea of online databases.

Until then, *Soundings'* ads had been typeset individually, listing whatever objective or qualitative criteria the boat seller thought a buyer might want. I suggested organizing the ad copy into sortable data fields using obvious categories, such as boat name, length, style, make, location, price, and engine. Turner took it from there, buying a copy of the FileMaker database program for his own Macintosh and experimenting with field names.

Online databases in 1992 still meant commercial operations like CompuServe, Prodigy, and the upstart America Online, so I queried them all about the possibility of putting thousands of used boat ads online each month. I also bought an IBM-PC program designed to add database capability to a dial-in bulletin board like the FidoNet ones I'd written about. Unfortunately, nothing seemed to do the job on a Macintosh, but I compiled a report on all the possibilities and gave it to Turner. I thought that was my last project for *Soundings*, as I was leaving New England waters for graduate school in lovely, but land-locked, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Navigating the Web

While I had been messing about in boats, the hypertext ideas I'd studied in 1988 had turned into a system for linking documents across the Internet. Tim Berners-Lee's creation, called the World Wide Web, became part of my inspiration for going into a doctoral program. Meanwhile, Al Gore and friends had legislated an end to the "scholars and geeks only" Internet, opening the Web to commercial traffic as an "information superhighway." Could an "Internet Waterway" be far behind?

One year into my doctoral program, I had a surprise call from *Soundings'* editor Marleah Ross inviting me to write the cover story for a special summer 1995 edition announcing *Soundings'* first website, and then follow it up with a monthly "Data Waves" column about Internet boating sites. The launch package would fill seven pages of the tabloid with two main stories and a raft of sidebars and pictures.

Soundings hadn't added a technical staff to build its Web presence. Instead, it had connected with Houston-based Kinetiks.com and GSN.com, creators of a Web portal for marine industry organizations. The portal was called both MarineNet and Internet Waterway, with the subtitle "Recreational Watersports Communities on the Internet." It was essentially an online mall for boating trade groups and publications, with *Soundings* as one of the anchor tenants, along with Midwestern and West Coast boating magazines. At the time, GSN.com was Global Shopping Network Inc. of Pasadena, Calif. (A search of the Internet Archive shows that the GSN.com address has been owned by TV's Game Show Network for several years, while the Kinetiks.com domain name was for sale in summer 2010.)

MarineNet GSN.com home page, circa 1997

Source: <http://web.archive.org/web/19961227140325/http://www.gsn.com>

Like *Soundings*, other former magazine tenants at MarineNet maintain an independent online presence today, while also remaining in print. *Heartland Boating* magazine is now <http://heartlandboating.com>, and *Sea* is <http://seamagazine.com>. *Sea's* publisher, Duncan McIntosh Inc., is the company that became owner last year of *Editor & Publisher*, the venerable newspaper industry magazine. Along with its print and Web titles, the firm organizes trade events for both the boating and publishing industries. It also operates a latter-day version of MarineNet as <http://goboating.com>.

For the August 1995 *Soundings*, editor Ross requested a package of articles to ease less technical readers into the ocean of online information, including an Internet glossary. I did interviews by phone and e-mail for new profiles of virtual yacht clubs of boaters connecting over CompuServe, Usenet, The WELL, and FidoNet. One sidebar described three dozen interesting websites.

Ross hired a topnotch nautical photographer to pose a couple of my e-mail interviewees with a laptop on the deck of a racing sailboat during a Newport regatta, and the art department Photoshopped in the image of *Soundings'* new home page on the laptop screen. (An editor's note explained the process and why fakery was necessary: Not only wouldn't a computer screen show up out on deck in bright sunlight, but Internet-capable wireless phone connections were pretty rare in 1995.)

Cover of August 1995 issue of *Soundings*

The early version of *Soundings*' website offered more text than pictures because of 1995's bandwidth limitations. Although it ran the full text of selected stories, including two about the Internet itself from the August 1995 issue, it could not incorporate the tabloid magazine's full seven-page package, which included more than a dozen images. The Web edition's front menu featured headlines and summaries adapted from the main story leads.

Top of *Soundings* online article archive page, 1995

Source: <http://web.archive.org/web/19970119210739/www.gsn.com/bin/fishing.exe?/sports/boating/soundings/sounding.htm&graphics&guest>

Apparently the combination of print and online was a business success, timed just right for the dot-com boom of the late 1990s. In 1997 Turner and co-owner Don McGraw sold Soundings Publications to Trader Publishing Co., described as the country's largest publisher of classified and photo advertising magazines. Trader Publishing Co. had been formed in 1991 as a 50-50 joint venture managing classified ad titles from Landmark Target Media and Cox's Trader Publications. Trader also acquired the Internet Waterway site from Kinetiks and merged with its <http://traderonline.com>. Since 2006, *Soundings* publisher of record has been Landmark-owned Dominion Enterprises of Norfolk, Virginia, which was created in a division of assets of Trader Publishing between Landmark and Cox. Dominion publishes 503 paid and free magazine titles and more than 40 websites, including <http://boats.com>.

But Jack Turner didn't "retire" from publishing altogether in 1997. He launched a local online newspaper called LymeLine.com, serving the towns of Lyme and Old Lyme, Connecticut, where he lived. The site continues to operate today. Turner also began to blog about one of his other passions—cooking. He was contributing to both regularly when he passed away in 2005.

“Jack had an extraordinarily versatile intellect,” George Brooks, president of Trader Publications, told *Soundings Trade Only* at the time of Turner’s death:

He would write or edit, sell, organize production, or write software if it was needed to bring an idea to life. I think his versatility was the key to attracting such a diverse and dedicated group of people who shared his dreams and now carry on his tradition. (*Soundings Trade Only*, 2005)

Among other things, Brooks praised Turner for creating “the marine industry’s first Internet service, long before most people had even heard of the Internet.” In the same article, boating industry advertising agency executive Donald Brewster added, “Real people weren’t on the Internet then.... He was waiting for the technology to catch up with the elegance of the idea. He was way out ahead.”

Turner certainly wasn’t afraid to invent or improvise, a theme that also turned up in a 2002 interview about his blog, “A Muse for Cooks.” He told Eric Ward’s URLwire.com that the audience he had in mind was anyone who considered a recipe to be a source of inspiration, not detailed instructions to be followed religiously:

‘There are millions of cooks who cook by instinct,’ says Jack Turner, an experienced amateur cook and creator of the website. ‘They improvise, just the way jazz musicians do. Recipes are nothing but a concept for them, like a melody line or string of chords...something to be built upon, embellished.’ (Ward, 2002)

That line about improvising echoes Turner’s work as publisher, turning a free newsletter for boaters into a tabloid magazine, spinning off an industry-insider publication, and following his muse to create a woodworking magazine, cooking blog, and local news website. (Turner’s blog site is gone, but some of it has been preserved in the Internet Archive: http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://cooksmuse.com)

Today’s <http://Soundingspub.com> or <http://Soundingsonline.com> opens with an automated slideshow that links to recent feature stories: a diesel/electric hybrid launch, a power boat company building racing/cruising sailboats, someone overhauling a MAKO powerboat, an electronics installer at a mahogany control panel. A “preview current issue” tab takes you to both a subscription ad (12 big issues only \$24.97) and the lead paragraphs from the Coastwise section. The department headings are News, Boat Shop, Columns/Blogs, Features, Calendar, and Subscription Services.

But tabs atop the menu suggest the continuing source of income: “Buy a boat: Online search,” “Sell a boat: Ad placement,” “Classifieds: view/purchase,” “Waterfront property.” The search categories for *Soundings* online classifieds today look a lot like the one Turner began typing into his Macintosh in 1993. You can sort by year, make and model, length, or price, and you can find anything from a 10-foot “pram” to a 238-foot icebreaker.

Last year Bill Sisson, who started as a *Soundings* reporter in the 1980s and has been its editor-in-chief for the past decade, wrote a retrospective to accompany a redesign of both the *Soundings*' print version and website. The site's new look was built entirely in-house, he wrote. He continued with a tribute to Turner:

Jack has been gone for some time, but his imprint is still felt on the magazine. He believed in accurate and objective reporting. He valued good writing. And he didn't mind covering stories that some of his competitors steered clear of. We think he would have liked the latest changes both in the magazine and online.

Today, *Soundings Online* caters to an audience more "wired" than the one it had fifteen years ago, when it had to explain Internet jargon. Now, along with an archive of past articles and up-to-date marine weather and tide information, the site has audio and video content and fresh stories that are posted between the print editions—"on the Web in as close to real time as possible," Sisson told his readers.

And, of course, the online edition still features that searchable database of boats and equipment for sale, matching the information and material needs of a nautical audience that apparently knows the *Soundings* brand as well as it knows a comfortable pair of boat shoes. Socks are not required.

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Much of this essay is a combination of research and personal memoir, not quite what the anthropologists refer to as "auto-ethnography." Part of the research was made possible by the collection of 1990s Web pages preserved online at the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine (<http://www.archive.org/web/web.php>), which boasts "over 150 billion web pages archived from 1996 to a few months ago."

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