

MIT News Office

In January 2009, the Office of the President asked the leadership of MIT's *Technology Review* (editor in chief and publisher Jason Pontin and deputy editor Nate Nickerson) to take on the management of the MIT News Office, as part of the overall budget-cutting measures being taken across the Institute in response to the global financial crisis. The new leadership was asked to improve the quality of the News Office's work while reducing costs by 15 percent. Over the winter and spring of 2009, the new leadership took a fresh look at what the News Office does and how it does it, then instituted changes. Those changes began to take effect at the beginning of fiscal year 2010.

What follows is an account of this year's work in the News Office's major responsibilities:

- Editorial production
- Media relations
- Crisis communications
- Emergency communications
- Daily design and maintenance of the MIT homepage

Editorial Production

By summer 2009, after careful consultation with hundreds of members of the MIT community, we decided on two important editorial changes.

The first concerned the writing. News pieces written in our office, we decided, ought to be every bit as balanced and probing as pieces you find in the *New York Times*: We have worked to keep stories from reading like hype and have asked our writers, whenever possible, to include non-MIT sources in their stories and to detail the next steps required to turn a research advance into a real-world application.

The second change concerned the medium by which the News Office delivers content. We determined that we would best serve the MIT community—and the world at large—by ceasing the weekly print publication *Tech Talk* and replacing it with daily online news coverage. This decision was not made lightly: Many of us in the new News Office are veterans of print and have strong personal connections to that medium. But given that our resources are limited, a decision to continue print would amount to a decision to arrest or limit the use of the web—and the more we explored all that the web could do for our office, the more excited we became. We spent the summer conceiving a website that would offer more and better news coverage, feature daily video, and democratize the creation of campus news by reaching out to scores of communications professionals spread across our campus. We aimed to build a site that would serve the MIT community while also inviting the outside world to read first-hand accounts of the Institute's work.

New Features

The new mission called for the MIT News Office to communicate Institute announcements to the MIT community and to the public; to publish community news for faculty, staff, and students; and to promote MIT research, innovation, and teachings to the broad public. This last mission was a new and important one for the News Office, and it prompted several key changes.

To meet the needs of this global audience, the News Office's beat-reporting structure was reorganized and the writing staff was expanded to five from three. The new beat-reporting structure corresponded to areas of interest both to MIT and to the broader public: energy; life sciences and engineering; computer science and technology; social sciences, business and humanities; and earth and space. At the same time, the News Office raised its editorial standards: Writers were discouraged from hyping research advances and were instead asked to make sure their articles included the opinion of an external expert and mentioned next steps and/or potential obstacles.

To fulfill its mission as a publisher of community news, the News Office incorporated a campus news feed on the main MIT News page and created a campus subpage featuring news, weather, classified ads and many other community resources. The News Office also democratized the production of campus news at MIT by opening up the site to dozens of campus communicators and allowing them to upload content directly to the site.

Shortly after launching MIT News, the News Office also introduced two new weekly e-mail digests: one geared toward the MIT community and the other aimed at the broader public. The internally focused product was initially distributed to everyone with an mit.edu e-mail address; subscribers were allowed to cancel at any time, while new ones could easily sign up.

In addition to launching MIT News, the News Office also reinvigorated the Institute's homepage, web.mit.edu. A new designer (Christine Daniloff) was hired in September 2009; the News Office revised the homepage's editorial standards; and a more streamlined and logical information architecture for web.mit.edu was launched in February 2010.

Results

MIT News has been a great success. In its first year, the site won a Webby award (the Oscar of the Internet), while the externally focused electronic digest won a silver medal in the Council for Advancement and Support of Education's Circle of Excellence Awards.

The site's popularity has exceeded management's rosier projections: On average, 400,000 users visit the site each month. More than 3.25 million unique visitors have been to MIT News since its launch. Unsurprisingly, stories about MIT research and innovation are the most widely read.

The two electronic digests have also proven to be popular. The internally focused digest was being sent to 23,000 subscribers as of June 2010, compared to 20,500 when it launched in 2009. The externally focused digest, which had no subscribers at launch, was

being sent to 900 people as of June 2010. It should be noted that *Tech Talk's* entire print run was 18,000, and so the digests alone are now reaching a wider audience than *Tech Talk* did.

The interest MIT's peer institutions have shown in MIT News provides a final measure of the site's success. Since MIT News launched in September, about a dozen top-tier US universities have reached out to the News Office and expressed an interest in learning about the site and its offerings. News Office staff have happily obliged.

The improvements to web.mit.edu have also received an overwhelmingly positive response. MIT's homepage appeared on several industry insiders' lists of the best-designed university websites during the past year, and not a week goes by without the News Office receiving compliments and/or requests from students, faculty, staff, or members of the public to reprint designs that appeared on web.mit.edu.

Going Forward

In the coming year, the editorial team hopes to build on these successes. More efforts will be made at marketing MIT News and its content beyond MIT. Third-party websites will be encouraged to republish MIT News content, provided they comply with our terms of use. New kinds of content will be added, and photography and video content will be better integrated with text. The editorial team will also feature more photography on web.mit.edu.

Media Relations

While rebuilding our editorial offering so that we could reach readers around the world directly, we continued to offer the Institute excellent service in media relations. For while we are very proud of our new news service, we remain eager to see the news of MIT cast in the light of the world's best media outlets. To that end, we have a dedicated media-relations team that works closely and skillfully with journalists—and we are in the midst of rebuilding the website we've made especially for them.

The media relations team in the MIT News Office operates on a boutique model of public relations and media outreach, playing to the strengths of MIT and what it represents to the world—particularly in an era of 24/7 media saturation and spin. Rather than continually blasting out emails to hundreds of reporters, we are increasingly putting our focus into promoting the most newsworthy research advances, announcements, and events coming out of MIT, and targeting our efforts to the most influential journalists at top news outlets.

We are also in the middle of redesigning the media relations website, with the goal of showcasing the best of MIT in a format that will be most helpful to busy journalists. As part of this project, we are putting together a comprehensive “experts” guide of MIT faculty and researchers—a service that should be extremely useful to members of the media.

Highlights of Media Coverage

- *New York Times*: Front-page story on student blogs (October 2009); story on an MIT panel at the World Economic Forum (January 2010); and three features on MIT researchers in the “Novelties” column of the Sunday business section
- *Boston Globe*: Eight front-page stories; major article on the Gordon Engineering Program and its focus on developing “people skills” in engineering students (October 2009)
- *The Economist*: 15 articles on MIT research/researchers
- *The New Yorker*: Major feature on Esther Duflo’s Poverty Action Lab (May, 2009)
- *Time magazine*: Amy Smith was named one of Time’s 100 most influential people of the year; John Wyatt’s retinal implant is named one of *Time*’s 50 best inventions of 2009
- *PBS NewsHour*: Six faculty appearances on the show this year
- **Cable News Network**: Five live segments with MIT researchers

Some of the research stories that received the most news coverage included:

- Barcodes for the rest of us (Ramesh Raskar, July 2009)
- Tracking trash (Carlo Ratti, July 2009)
- Retinal implant (John Wyatt, September 2009)
- Moral judgments can be altered (Rebecca Saxe, March 2010)
- Thermopower waves (Michael Strano, March 2010)
- MIT-designed green airplane (Ed Greitzer, May 2010)

Events

The Media Relations team managed public relations and media outreach for several high profile announcements and events, which resulted in major media coverage for the Institute. These efforts were also helpful to MIT’s relations with partner companies, such as Eni and NStar.

- **“Giant Leaps” Apollo 40th anniversary celebration** (June 2009): Over 25 journalists attended, including reporters from the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the BBC.
- **Launch of the MIT Center for Gynepathology Research** (November 2009): Front-page story in the *Boston Globe* and additional coverage in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, ABC News, Reuters, and other news outlets.

- **Release of report by Initiative on Faculty Race and Diversity** (January 2010): Front-page story in the *Boston Globe*.
- **Media Lab building opening/press event** (March 2010): Over 35 journalists attended, which yielded coverage in top design publications (*Architectural Record*, *Metropolis*, etc.) and other major news outlets (*Wall Street Journal*, *Boston Globe*, etc.)
- **MIT Energy Conference and press briefing** (March 2010): This year, in addition to arranging media coverage of the energy conference, we put together a separate energy media briefing for reporters the day before the conference. Twenty journalists attended the combined events.
- **Launch of MIT/Eni Solar Frontiers Center/press conference** (April 2010): We worked closely with members of Eni's communications team, who were very pleased with our efforts. Ten reporters attended the press briefing, which resulted in major coverage in the *Boston Globe*, *CNET*, and other publications.
- **Launch of MIT report on the future of natural gas/press conference** (June 2010): Over 20 reporters attended the press conference at the National Press Club. Results included coverage in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Forbes*, *CNN*, and other media outlets.

President Hockfield in the Media

The media relations team coordinated press coverage for President Susan Hockfield, including a meeting with top Bloomberg News editors that resulted in a major profile of President Hockfield (June 2010); an op-ed placement in the *Wall Street Journal* (November 2009); and interviews with several international publications.

Crisis Communications

The leadership of the News Office assists the vice president for institute affairs and other senior members of the administration with internal and external communications pertaining to sensitive Institute matters. This year, due in part to the kinds of difficulties that naturally follow Institute-wide budget cutting, there was a special need for work in sensitive communications. Across a varied set of disparate circumstances, this office sought to underscore those Institute values of greatest importance in difficult times: openness, collaboration, sensitivity, forthrightness, and fairness.

Emergency Communications

During emergencies at MIT, the News Office plays a critical role in various ways.

Emergency Operations Center/Public Information Officer

The director of communications (Nate Nickerson) serves on the command staff of the MIT Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in the role of public information officer. In this role he manages all internal and external communications and serves as an Institute spokesperson to the media.

During this year, he worked to improve the relationship between the News Office and the EOC, and to serve as a liaison between the EOC and the vice president for institute affairs. He led the alteration of certain protocols such that in times of imminent physical danger to members of the MIT community, plans are in place that will allow for better and faster communications from the EOC to the MIT community.

MIT Homepage

The director of communications worked with Bill VanSchalkwyk, managing director of environment, health and safety programs, to create a protocol by which emergency notifications could be linked to from the MIT homepage. The News Office built the technical capabilities that would allow the posting, at a moment's notice, of an emergency link from the homepage pointing readers to MIT's Emergency website, and the director of communications worked with the overall EOC staff to create protocols for when this new capability would be used and who would manage it. In his role as the public information officer, the director of communications manages this capability during all emergencies.

Extended Communications to the MIT Community

The director of communications worked with the EOC to give the EOC the capability of sending emergency communications to all members of the MIT community by text message, email, and phone; the EOC has built that capability. The director of communications manages these communications during emergencies.

Daily Design and Maintenance of the MIT Homepage

MIT decides on the content and executes the design of the MIT homepage every day.

As part of the News Office's transition over the last year, the role of the MIT homepage spotlight has also been refocused for a global audience. The spotlight area continues to feature a compelling daily-changing image designed by the News Office designer—sometimes photo-based, sometimes featuring original illustration—but those images and stories featured are focused less on campus events and internal news, and more on research, education, and innovation that is of interest to a worldwide audience. The spotlight and MIT homepage serve as the face of the Institute and encourage further engagement and exploration of MIT's sites. The response to the expanded focus has been very positive. In FY10, there were 10.3 million visits to the MIT homepage from 3.3 million unique users (25 percent of the visits were from outside of the United States, with 228 countries/territories represented).

Nate Nickerson
Editorial Director