

# ***Building a National Newswire for the Nonprofit Sector***

## *How AScribe came to be.*

The following essay explains how choices made in 1997 and 1998 led to AScribe's growth into North America's leading newswire for higher education and the nonprofit sector

Since 1999, as AScribe has expanded nationally and internationally, public and private institutions – especially those focused on educational, political, public-policy and public-interest issues – have recognized AScribe's unique capabilities.

AScribe is designed to put its members' news directly into newsroom systems via The AP, into international news-retrieval databases such as LexisNexis and Factiva and onto the Web via Google News and topical Web sites – and to do it at a cost any organizations can afford.

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*For further information:*

David Irons / Ron Wolf  
Co-founders  
AScribe / The Public Interest Newswire

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dirons@ascribe.org / rwolf@ascribe.org  
510 653 9400

## ***Building a National Newswire for Nonprofit News***

Everyone responsible for disseminating news on behalf of educational and nonprofit institutions faces the same problems: first, how to cut through an incredible amount of media clutter to reach target audiences and, second, how to do it in an easy, affordable manner.

Faced with these issues in the mid-1990s, the University of California led the way in creating an innovative solution that is now benefiting organizations everywhere. A small ad-hoc group investigated this situation at UC in 1995 and determined that educational institutions and nonprofit organizations needed nothing less than their own dedicated wire service. The Berkeley working group envisioned the modern version of a traditional wire service providing a direct connection to the newsrooms of major media organizations in the same manner as The Associated Press and other national and international wire services.

The group designing the newswire included journalists, communications professionals, newspaper publishers and computer systems specialists, with support from peers across many disciplines. The service was developed in close consultation with communications officers throughout the nine-campus University of California system and their counterparts at other San Francisco and Silicon Valley institutions. One key goal was to provide this service at a price that all nonprofit institutions could afford, an option utterly absent from existing services.

Today, AScribe Newswire transmits releases from about 600 educational institutions, associations, foundations and other nonprofit and public institutions. It distributes this news in real time directly into the publishing systems of leading daily newspapers such as The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Toronto Globe & Mail, Financial Times and many others. At the same time, AScribe provides news from the wire to hundreds of web sites with millions of viewers. AScribe also extends the “shelf life” of news releases transmitted on the wire by making them available through news-retrieval services such as LexisNexis, Dow Jones-Reuters’ Factiva, Dialog, the Gale Group and others. To date, AScribe Newswire has carried more than 33,000 news releases on behalf of its members. About 60 percent of these releases pertain to education, health, medicine, science or research; the rest focus on public policy, advocacy, culture and the arts. AScribe has created the first national and international news distribution system for news releases of this kind.

### ***Why build a traditional newswire?***

Seven key factors contributed to the decision to create a dedicated wire service for public-interest news.

1) *Cutting through the incredible volume of news delivered to news organizations each day.*

In a 24-hour news cycle, a large daily paper easily may receive four or five million words from all its wire services, staff reporters, bureaus, columnists and organizations that submit news releases. The only way

news organizations can deal with this avalanche of words is by relying on their computers to receive, sort, index, and route the news to the appropriate reporters and editors. In practice, news organizations are nearly unable to deal with the volumes of information that comes to them by mail or fax. To receive adequate consideration, a news release must reach the media through the digital channels they now rely upon.

2) *Responding to around-the-clock news cycles.*

We live today in an age of 24-hour news coverage by daily papers, broadcast networks, cable, satellite and the Internet. These media organizations cover news as it happens; this means public information officers must respond to the media more quickly than ever. Organizations with breaking news to announce, or sources who can contribute to important stories, must get this information to the media faster than ever. Those who move their news quickest and respond fastest receive more attention than those who don't.

3) *Exploiting new opportunities for coverage.*

Almost every major news organization has cut its reporting and editing staff. Newsrooms are under great pressure to do more with less. As a result, news organizations are more willing than ever to use reliable, balanced information presented to them in news releases. But they prefer to receive this news delivered through their digital newsroom publishing systems, not by mail or fax. They want it on the wire.

4) *Enhancing credibility.*

News organizations pay more attention to information that comes to them via trusted intermediaries. They rely on wire services to filter the flow of information about the day's events and present them with the most important or salient news. News gains credibility by moving on the same wire with other credible information.

5) *Adopting distribution technology that has worked well for corporate news, but doing it at affordable prices.*

For almost 50 years, the world's largest corporations have enjoyed the benefit of distributing their financial news over the dedicated wire services like PR Newswire and Business Wire. These services became dominant in their field by delivering sensitive and timely financial news from corporate communications departments directly into newsroom publishing systems. They obviously work well for a specialized form of news – corporate financial and new-product information. But educational and other nonprofit organizations have not found the corporate wires effective or affordable. The cost of using the corporate wires – as much as \$1000 per release – is much too high for regular use by nonprofit institutions. They needed an affordable solution.

6) *Creating the “right neighborhood” for public-interest news increases awareness and coverage.*

People looking for certain types of information go to centralized locations that aggregate a lot of it. Moviegoers look for ads on the movie page; job seekers look in the employment classifieds. Because the two existing wires focus on corporate news, journalists covering other beats, such as education, health or public

policy simply don't look to them for news leads. Nonprofit institutions do a far better job of making their voices heard when they affiliate and create their own distinctive "neighborhood" for their news.

*7) Extending the shelf life of news releases via inclusion in major news-retrieval databases.*

Journalists routinely use LexisNexis, Dow Jones-Reuters' Factiva, Dialog and GoogleNews to research stories and find news sources. Nonprofit institutions had no affordable way to place their news into these important digital archives. Only a dedicated wire service, with news from many credible organizations, could command the attention of the databases used most frequently by journalists, researchers and the public. Only a dedicated wire service could ensure that news from public-interest organizations would be archived in these databases.

### ***Taking advantage of the Internet***

While building a traditional wire service would greatly improve distribution of news to major media organizations, it would not, by itself, address many other communications challenges of the Internet age. Because of the growing importance of the Internet, the Berkeley working group recommended that the newswire service be developed side-by-side with systems to distribute news releases to web sites, portals, Intranets and other Internet-based media channels.

To do the job right, it would be necessary to build a flexible, hybrid wire to serve the needs of well established, traditional media organizations and emerging new-media organizations and also deliver news and information through cutting-edge technologies. Nothing else would work as well. Some of the considerations in planning the Internet component of the wire service included the following:

*1) The dramatic increase in media complexity.*

The growth of the Internet brought a tremendous increase in the number and variety of media delivering news and information. A decade ago, a news office for a university or nonprofit organization had to deal with newspapers, wire services, broadcasters and trade publications. Now, millions of people globally receive news from Internet services, portals, hubs, online services, personalized e-clipping services, e-newsletters and vertical web sites. This shift places extraordinary new demands on communications offices everywhere.

To take full advantage of these opportunities, communications professionals needed new tools for dealing with the proliferation of media and the technical complexity of placing their news releases into these new channels. Communications offices everywhere found distribution to so many new and different outlets to be increasingly burdensome, time-consuming and expensive. A well-designed wire service could serve many channels of distribution and perform all the formatting and other technical manipulation necessary to deliver news to these new digital outlets in the form they need.

2) *The growing importance of “news on demand” and vertical channels.*

The Internet has changed the way people look for news. Millions now seek out focused sites offering news on specific topics. For example, journalists and researchers everywhere now find news about everything from asthma to zoology on specialized web sites as well as in general news media and the trade press. Communications offices need efficient ways to flow their news on a wide variety of topics to the growing universe of specialized web sites and vertical channels.

3) *Responding to the demographic gap and reaching younger audiences.*

The shift to Internet-based forms of news delivery has opened a vast demographic gap. Traditional media channels are losing effectiveness, especially among younger audiences. Newspaper readership in North America and elsewhere has dwindled significantly among those under the age of 35 as younger people have turned to the Internet for news and information. Therefore, a communications strategy based solely on traditional media runs a great risk that the message will miss younger audiences – the people necessary to sustain vital institutions in the future.

4) *The changing nature of the news release.*

Growth of the Internet dramatically shifted the nature and function of the news release. A decade ago, a news release was a document intended solely to attract the attention of journalists – an invitation for coverage. The proliferation of web sites and online services has created a demand for news releases that stand on their own as complete stories without additional work by journalists. Many thousands of web sites now publish news releases verbatim. The best releases from the most credible institutions stand out.

For many Internet-based new-media channels, news releases go beyond inviting coverage; now they provide coverage. However, individual communications offices usually cannot take advantage of this opportunity on their own. They need an aggregating distribution system that can stream many news releases on similar topics to potential users who regard them as a way to provide primary coverage.

5) *The growing legal-rights issue.*

Growth of the Internet is accompanied by new case law on copyrights. Although news offices obviously distribute news releases with the intention that they be used by the media, web publishers are unwilling to publish anything unless and until they have clear legal permission to do so. Communications professionals need a legal rights clearing house – an easy, efficient way to assure web publishers that they are in compliance with copyright regulations.

***Meeting Many Needs at Once***

These were the “raw” intellectual and practical considerations on which AScribe Newswire’s initial concept rested. The idea was to create a service that would meet as many of these needs as possible.

- It would allow educational and other nonprofit news offices to “go digital” and send their news releases into major news organizations via a preferred channel and in real time.
- It would send their news into the principal digital news-retrieval services used by journalists.
- It would make that news available to web sites and online services in a way that institutions could not achieve on their own.

Creating a new national wire service would obviously be a substantial undertaking. Such an ambitious project was beyond the resources of any single institution’s news office. No one university, nonprofit organization or association can do this well alone. To be effective, a national newswire must carry news from many hundreds of institutions and organizations. A wire service commands the attention of media organizations precisely because it brings together credible information from many sources.

Fortunately, several important developments converged to make creation of this new wire service possible. Rapid improvements in the power of personal computers and servers opened the way to building the necessary systems at reasonable cost. Even more important, however, was the availability of transmission capacity on the private telecom network that major news organizations need to move stories among themselves.

The Associated Press, best known for its news-gathering operations around the world, also maintains a highly reliable, highly secure private network linking nearly all the country’s daily newspapers. National wire services operated by media organizations, such as The New York Times, the Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune and Knight Ridder, all share transmission capacity on this network operated on their behalf by The AP. AScribe Newswire, with the backing of journalists and newspaper publishers, was able to rent capacity on this same network. Having access to The AP network greatly simplified the technical problems of linking AScribe to major news organizations. It also reduced the need for costly investment in telecommunications equipment.

### ***Growth of the wire***

AScribe began operations in March 1998, transmitting news on behalf of 20 members. At the outset, institutions using the services included most of the major universities and medical centers in California and three national laboratories run by the University of California. By the end of 1998, more than 60 institutions were using the wire regularly to distribute their news.

In 1999 and 2000, AScribe Newswire expanded nationally, first extending service to the East Coast and the Midwest with support from leading institutions in those areas. Early adopters included large universities (Yale, the University of Chicago, Purdue), major academic medical centers (Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Duke), research-centered institutions (Argonne and Battelle National Laboratories and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute), and foundations supporting such work (Ford, Rockefeller, MacArthur).

As the number of sending institutions increased, more news outlets found the wire useful. As more newsrooms began using the wire, more organizational news-makers found it useful. As the volume of news on the wire grew, large database services such as LexisNexis, Factiva, Comtex News Network, The Gale Group and Dialog decided they needed AScribe members' news in their archives.

AScribe Newswire now serves about 600 organizations and institutions in North America and seven countries. The service has grown with no advertising, but it has been aided by articles in The New York Times and trade publications covering both media and nonprofits. Another major factor in the growth of the wire has been recommendations from AScribe members.

### ***Evaluation and assessment***

After six years in operation, the question arises: How is AScribe Newswire working for its members?

Institutions issue news releases for many reasons. AScribe cannot evaluate performance of the wire in accomplishing the diverse goals of 600 separate organizations. The wire was designed to make news from members much more widely available to traditional news organizations, newer online media outlets and news retrieval databases – channels that members could not easily reach on their own. One reasonable measure is how much AScribe is able to increase story placements or “hits” for its members through these channels.

Clipping services used by AScribe members do find examples of news releases published in daily papers that are credited to “AScribe Newswire” or stories that include acknowledgement that “AScribe Newswire contributed to this report.” It’s unusual for newspapers to give credit so directly to news releases, but it happens.

In general, where it’s possible to count hits, AScribe’s results are good. LexisNexis and Factiva report downloads of stories from AScribe Newswire growing by about 10 percent every month. Usage of stories from the wire by individual web services also show healthy month-to-month growth.

There’s a great paradox to the Internet, however. While it’s possible to count some types of utilization more precisely than ever, the Internet makes it more difficult, or even impossible, to measure other types of use. Most search engines do not index news stories posted to web sites. The major search engines crawl the web every few weeks. Because news tends to be ephemeral, it may be posted only for a few days before it is replaced by fresher information. Search engines abhor broken links, which frustrate their users; as a result they do not index ephemeral information that is frequently updated to avoid the problem of broken links.

An additional complication is that much of the information on the Internet is actually displayed on corporate Intranets or proprietary services not accessible to the public. Items posted this way are beyond

the reach of search engines and other forms of tracking. Researchers studying the Internet report that well over half of all nodes are within corporate Intranets. These nodes use AScribe members' news, but they are beyond the reach of tools for tracking use of news from the wire.

In light of such difficulties, AScribe relies on several indirect measures to determine how well the wire is working for member institutions. These indicators include:

*Anecdotal reports* – AScribe members often report that they receive phone calls from unexpected media contacts, occasionally within minutes of distributing news via AScribe.

*Renewal rate* – AScribe carefully watches the rate at which members renew annually as a way of measuring satisfaction. To date, renewal rates remain well above 80 percent, and for AScribe's most frequent users it exceeds 90 percent.

*Usage rate* – AScribe watches the rate at which members distribute news releases as another way of measuring satisfaction. While there are seasonal fluctuations, daily and annual usage continues to rise.

*Newsroom adoption rate* – Before a newsroom makes arrangements to receive AScribe Newswire, senior editors conduct their own evaluation of the content on the wire to be sure the information is useful for their newsroom staffs and, ultimately, of interest to their audience. Newspapers and new-media outlets continue to perform these assessments and choose to bring AScribe Newswire into their newsrooms.

### ***Changing tools for a changing world***

The media landscape has experienced profound changes in the last decade. Traditional news organizations have undergone consolidation and cutbacks. New online services have emerged as important providers of news and information. Younger people routinely receive key information from web sites that no one over the age of 30 has even heard of.

One consequence of such profound change is that public information professionals need new tools and practices if they expect to have a profound impact for their respective organizations. Communications techniques that have worked well in the past have lost some of their effectiveness in this new environment. As the media evolve, older techniques become increasingly less suited to current requirements.

One important conclusion is that communications offices must "go digital." They need to distribute their news digitally to be effective in working with traditional media. And they need to distribute their news digitally to reach Internet services, portals, vertical sites, databases and search engines, corporate Intranets and all the other new channels of distribution exploding around them.

Those who master the new digital technologies will be much more able to get their news directly into the hands of the people who are most interested in it. And they will be able to get their message across in the form in which they wrote it, without nearly so much reinterpretation by journalistic middlemen.

AScribe's role in this environment is to supply new tools that organizations need to make effective use of traditional and new-media channels. In this rapidly changing media landscape, organizations and institutions must band together to do collectively those things that they cannot do individually.

AScribe Newswire provides a modern vehicle for such collective action that demonstrates its value to its members every day.

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For additional information on AScribe Newswire,  
please contact us at 510-653-9400 or [info@ascribe.org](mailto:info@ascribe.org).