ICSC

Internet Content Syndication Council

INTERNET CONTENT SYNDICATION

Content Creation and Distribution in an Expanding Internet Universe:
A White Paper, May 2008

Acknowledgements

The Internet Content Syndication Council would like to thank all of its members for contributing their valuable insight to the development of this paper. We invite reader comment and participation in our industry as it develops. Thank you in advance.

> For the Council,
>
> -Andrew Susman
> Chairman, ICSC
> President, Studio One Networks.

Introduction

Internet Content Syndication is a powerful business structure for the distribution of content on the Internet. It overcomes the problem of audience fragmentation by placing the same content on multiple Web sites in order to increase the ability of users to find it. By aggregating the user bases of multiple Web sites, it confers important benefits on all four constituents of the media industry: content creators, publishers, advertisers and users.

- **Content creators** benefit from greater reach than publishing on one Web site.
- **Content publishers** gain affordable access to valuable content.
- **Advertisers** are able to reach a larger, more-targeted audience.
- **Users** have the benefit of accessing high-quality content more easily.

Internet Content Syndication encompasses a growing spectrum of distribution sources, and the industry is now beginning to set standards for the various types of syndication available. This paper will:

- define "Internet Content Syndication,"
- distinguish it from other forms of distribution,
- describe the different types of Internet Content Syndication, and
- analyze its benefits for all the constituents of the media industry.

Executive Summary

"Internet Content Syndication" may be defined as follows:

> **The controlled placement of the same content on multiple partnering Internet destinations.**

Figure 1. Internet Content Syndication: A Solution to Audience Fragmentation.
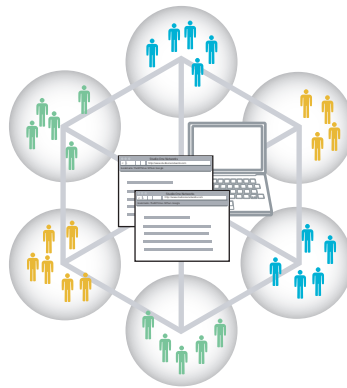
"Controlled placement" signifies that content itself is placed on the destination sites—to some degree, those placements are directed by the content owner. "Multiple destination" placement of content is used to increase licensing fees and audience exposure. Destinations partner with the content owner by either contributing value in return for valuable content or by sharing revenue.

This definition distinguishes Internet Content Syndication from other Internet distribution methods such as fixed-site, linking and viral models, as well as direct-to-user systems such as e-mail. Some applications, including RSS and widgets are often used in both ways—as direct-to-user and syndicated to partnering Web sites.

Types of Syndication
There are several ways in which Internet Content Syndication may be categorized: by business structure, by types of content and by methods of selecting distribution partners.

Business structures for Internet Content Syndication
- Licensed content, where the distribution partners pay a fee to the content originator for the right to carry the content.
- Advertiser-supported content, in which the content comes with embedded advertising that appears on all distribution partners' Web sites.
- Free syndication, in which no currency changes hands, and the content creator is either a promotional entity, a vanity publisher or a government entity.

Types of syndicated content
- RSS or Atom feeds, which usually disseminate headlines and summaries while the full content remains on the originating Web site.
- Full Content, in which the complete content module is distributed to distribution partner sites. This latter type includes widgets, in which frequently updated content may appear in a window.

Methods for selecting distribution partners
- In the case of opt-in selections, the destination sites select content to carry or users select content to view.
- Targeted distribution describes a situation in which the content originator selects partnering entities based on specific criteria, such as the quantity of its audience or the audience's demographic or behavioral information.

Key Benefits
Internet Content Syndication provides an important solution to a problem caused by the vast size and rapid expansion of the Internet. Primarily, it enables content creators and advertisers to attract and engage a sufficiently large audience of users in the midst of a rapidly expanding and fragmenting environment.

Because the Internet is an active, rather than passive, medium, users are constantly seeking out new content such as the latest video, a breaking news item or a nugget of specialized information. However, creating this content is often expensive—if not in materials, then in the labor and time required to produce and keep it updated.

Internet Content Syndication facilitates the creation of content by either amortizing the cost of licensed content across multiple entities or by maximizing the distribution of advertising-supported content in a controlled fashion so as to aggregate large but targeted audiences for advertisers. This results in a highly sustainable business model which provides a win-win situation for all four constituents of the media industry:

- Content creators can earn more revenue, either through license fees from multiple publishing partners or through the aggregation of larger audiences for advertising, than they can with a single-site distribution.
- Publishers receive this higher-quality content for their Web sites on an affordable basis.
- Advertisers can increase the effectiveness of their campaigns by aggregating large but targeted Internet audiences within a compatible content environment.
- Users, the most important constituent of the content industry, benefit from more content of higher quality that is more easily found on the Internet.

Media Growth Trends

As a general rule, the value of any communication medium is proportional to the size of its audience. This is especially true for media supported by advertising or subscription revenue. However, it also applies to not-for-profit media. The bigger the audience, the more influential that audience probably is.

It is possible to observe the history of mass electronic communications as experiencing a steady increase in distribution channels while decreasing the audience size per channel. The early history of radio broadcasts indicates that each broadcast was an isolated incident. In other words, one event was broadcast in a given location at a given time, like a boxing match or an opera, for example. As such, anyone in that area at that time who was listening to broadcast radio was listening to that particular broadcast. Over time, the number of both amplitude- and frequency-modulated (AM and FM) radio stations per location grew astronomically.

As the number of radio stations proliferated, it became increasingly difficult for events of national importance to reach a wide audience. At the third national radio conference in October 1924, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover "suggested the mutual organization by broadcasting stations…which would furnish programs of national events and arrange for their broadcasting."

A report at that same conference further noted: "The advantages to the Government of a national syndicate or chain of broadcasting stations that will enable the executives of the nation to reach the public with a single voice in the space of a single hour are well-known to the radio trade, and the benefits of such a system are greatly appreciated." The idea for syndicating radio programs came from the Press Association of the time, which syndicated important news announcements and stories to local newspapers around the country.

Television followed a similar road. From the 1940s to 1980, the "Big Three" networks—ABC, CBS and NBC—reached the entire TV-watching audience. In the early 1980s, however, cable and satellite technology lowered the cost of entry for new television networks. As a result, the number of channels proliferated, and the audience fragmented away from the Big Three. By 1997, the broadcast networks attracted less than 50 percent of the audience. The erosion of the audience continues to plague the Big Three networks, as well as many of their cable competitors, as they struggle to earn enough advertising revenue to support their high production costs.

The Internet has followed a very similar path but at a much faster rate and with many more channels than either radio or television. According to Netcraft, there are an estimated 165.7 million Internet sites as of April 2008 and probably more that Netcraft's spider has not crawled. Figure 2 shows a year-over-year growth in the number of Web sites at an astonishing 43 percent. Further, the number of Web pages, while not presently known, is estimated to be 45 billion. As Figure 2 shows, this number is likely to increase at an accelerated rate in the near future, especially as new uses, such as social networking and video downloads, are discovered and improved upon for the Internet.

Figure 2. The Growth of the Internet

Total Sites Across All Domains August 1995 - April 2008


Legend: Host names, Active
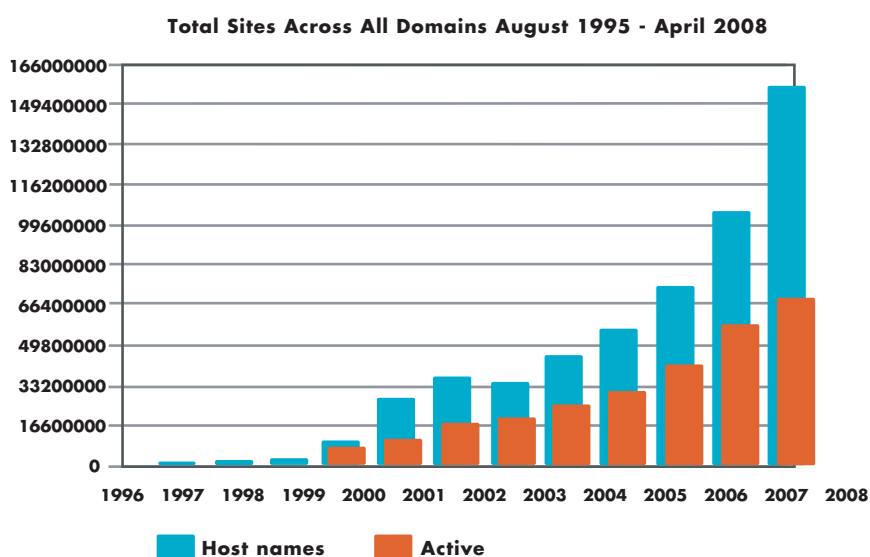
As with television and radio, the vast number of destinations on the Internet has caused severe audience fragmentation. It has become increasingly difficult for any one Web site to stand out and attract an audience. This is compounded by the fact that, in contrast to the relatively passive audiences of television, Internet users are extremely active seekers of content. By and large, the only places where audiences accumulate in large numbers are the big search portals, such as Yahoo! and Google—from whence they set out on their individual journeys through the vastness of cyberspace. As such, visits to these big search portals tend to be rather brief. Social networks are another big attractor, and unlike portals, users tend to stay on them for a significant duration. However, as Facebook has discovered, users can be volatile.

Although the increased number of destinations on the Internet is presumably a blessing for users, it creates a problem for the creators and presenters of content. Content is generally expensive to both create and present, if not in monetary outlay then in the time required to produce, distribute and continually update it. In the short term, a content creator or publisher may be satisfied to publish his information without recompense, merely for the glory of having his work viewed by others. In the long term, however, providing content for free is not likely to be a sustainable business model, except for certain government institutions and vanity publishers.

Revenue Sources

Internet content is generally paid for in three ways: subscriptions, paid advertising and licensing fees. Because Internet users are notoriously resistant to paying for content, the number of content creators and publishers earning substantial revenue from subscriptions is fairly low. Therefore, to date advertising has proved to be a more pervasive source for revenue.

Like with radio and television, as the Internet audience of users has grown, its importance to the advertising community has grown in tandem. According to one report from private equity firm Veronis Suhler Stevenson, total online advertising spend reached $30.5 billion in 2007 and has been growing at an average annual rate of 21% since 2001. Internet advertising recently surpassed radio as the fourth-largest advertising medium in terms of overall share of United States advertising expenditure. Because subscriptions are so unpopular with users, advertising is, and will likely remain, the biggest source of revenue for content providers and publishers.

Figure 3. Internet Advertising Spend 2001-2007
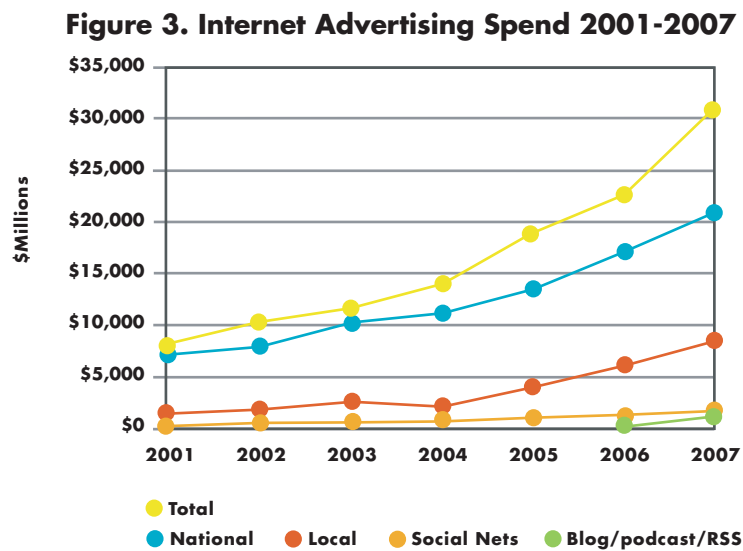
The third option is to earn revenue from Internet content by licensing it to other destination sites in exchange for a fee. However, these destination sites must then recoup their fees through either subscriptions or advertising. Therefore, audience fragmentation in a rapidly expanding and primarily advertising-supported Internet causes two problems:

- First, it makes it more difficult for content creators and publishers to attract a large enough audience to generate meaningful revenue from advertising.
- Second, it compounds the difficulty for advertisers to find appropriate, targeted destinations where they can place their ads adjacent to compatible content and reach high-value audiences.

Because the majority of the content on the Internet is supported by advertising, the problem of audience fragmentation arguably threatens the Internet itself.

A Powerful Solution to Fragmentation

Internet Content Syndication, defined as the controlled placement of the same content on multiple partnering Internet destinations, is viewed as a powerful solution to the problem of audience fragmentation. Increasingly, content owners and publishers are turning to one another as a means of aggregating sufficiently large audiences to overcome the problem of fragmentation. The placement of content on multiple destinations, as opposed to a single Web site, gives it a greater chance of being found by interested users.

Although search engines can theoretically enable any user to find any content they are seeking, users in fact have favorite destinations, often located on their browsers, which send them with greater frequency to Web sites which they have visited and found useful in the past. In fact, the most popular method of reaching some of the Internet's most popular Web sites is "direct navigation," which consists of either typing in the URL of the site or accessing a bookmark stored on the user's browser.

The placement of content on multiple destinations, especially those with a strong affinity to the subject matter, mathematically increases the odds of an interested user locating it through direct navigation. In general, this provides important benefits to all parties over other distribution models.

For content creators and owners, syndicating the same content to multiple destinations allows for increased revenue, either through licensing fees from the multiple publishers or through aggregating larger audiences for advertising. This compares especially well to fixed-site distribution, in which the content is published on one site only, which accrues no licensing fees and a much more limited audience for advertisers.

For publishers, the availability of syndicated content allows for access to professionally produced, frequently updated content on an affordable basis, since the costs are shared among multiple destinations. This makes the publishers' Web sites more attractive to users and increases user engagement since, unlike linking to content, it keeps the users within the publisher site (although this is less true for RSS feeds). This increases the duration of user sessions, page views and advertising impressions.

For advertisers, syndication allows the increased effectiveness of campaigns by aggregating large, targeted Internet audiences within a compatible editorial environment. Further, it facilitates the media-buying process for Internet advertisers by reducing the expense of researching and purchasing multiple individual affinity destination Web sites. Since ads run adjacent to the same content wherever it appears, advertisers are assured that it will appear in an appropriate environment. The degree of targeting will depend to some extent on how selective the syndicator is in choosing destination partners or how controlled the placement is.

Because of all these benefits, Internet Content Syndication makes sufficient resources available for the creation of more and higher-quality content by combining the revenue-generating potential of multiple destinations. This benefits the most important constituent in the syndication model, Internet users, by providing them with more, high-quality content that is easily found on the Internet.

**Figure 4. Internet Content Syndication Benefits Matrix**

Party	Benefit
Content Creators	Increased revenue from: ▶ licensing fees from multiple publishers ▶ aggregation of larger audiences for advertising
Publishers	Affordable access to high-quality content More attractive site for users Increased user engagement, and: ▶ duration of user sessions ▶ page views ▶ advertising impressions
Advertisers	Aggregation of large, targeted online audience Controlled editorial environment Facilitation of online media-buying process
Users	More, higher-quality Internet content, easier to locate

Distinguishing Syndication From Other Online Distribution Systems

To further define Internet Content Syndication, it is helpful to compare it with the benefits and drawbacks of other forms of online distribution, which can be understood as residing along a spectrum of controlled placement. At one end of the spectrum, with the most control, is fixed-site distribution, in which the content is placed exclusively on one Web site. Full content syndication follows next along the spectrum, offering targeted partner selection that provides the content creator a little less control over the presentation of his content. Opt-in syndication, such as RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds, comes next, because it typically allows the content creator a little less control over the presentation, as feed readers typically display a summary of the content or an altered version of the full content.

Finally, at the far end of the spectrum is viral distribution, in which the content creator gives up full control and allows the placement of his content anywhere on the Internet. Because destination sites are not in any way controlled by the content creator, and because destination sites are not partners with the content creator, viral distribution cannot be considered Internet Content Syndication.

**Figure 5. The Distribution Trade-off:
Increased Distribution and Decreased Control**
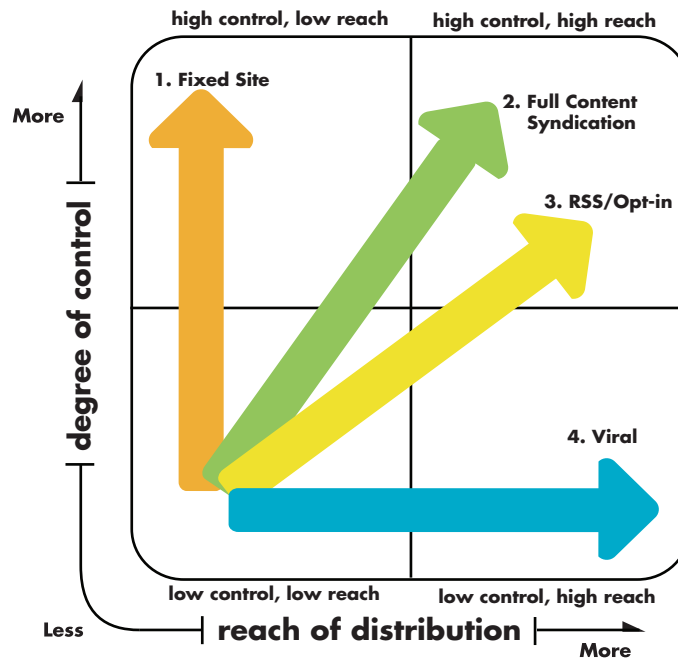
Fixed-Site Distribution
Fixed-site distribution offers the content creator the most control over the placement and presentation of the content. Simply put, fixed-site distribution is the creation of unique content for placement on a single Internet destination. Because the content is not distributed to any other Web site, this cannot be considered Internet Content Syndication.

In return for enhanced control, the content creator and presenter must accept that the number of potentially interested users able to find the content among the vast number of Internet sites will be limited. Over time, especially if the content on the fixed-site is of high value or quality, other Web sites will create inbound links to the fixed site, which will increase the ability of users to find it through navigation or through the use of search engines. Further, the content owner and publisher may engage in aggressive promotional tactics such as paid search or display advertising campaigns to increase the number of users. However, Internet promotion can be an expensive, complex and time-consuming endeavor.

For publishers, fixed-site distribution, or "exclusive content," is best viewed as a gamble. In the best of all possible worlds, the content is of high quality and extreme interest to users who will visit the publisher's site en masse and increase his subscription and/or advertising revenue. However, exclusive content that is not of high quality or interest will merely languish unnoticed on the publisher's site, not driving revenue, which over time prevents the publisher from being able to afford the high cost of content creation. As any publisher knows, scoring such a "big break" is rare.

For advertisers who buy media on a fixed site, the same general rule applies. They are guaranteed a compatible editorial environment, because they know in advance the exact location and context of their message. However, in the absence of a "big break" as described above, in which the content is of extreme quality and interest to users, advertisers on fixed-site content must accept a limited audience for their message. This complicates the overall online media-buying process for them, forcing them to research and purchase media on a large number of individual fixed sites to achieve the scale they require.

Users are likely indifferent to the fact that content that interests them is found only on one site as they only need one site to access it. However, it may not be easy to locate, even via a search engine. Of course, once located, it is easy to return to, especially if added to a browser's bookmark list.

Full Content Syndication

Full content syndication is where the entire content—be it a blog, news article, video, widget or any other type of high-value content—is placed on multiple destinations and formatted to appear as if the destination is the originator of the content. These destination sites may be selected by the content creator or may opt in to publication on an automated basis. In the case of full content syndication, publishers who opt in are carefully screened by the content creator for quality and compatibility.

For content owners, full content syndication offers a way for the creator to get the content in front of as wide an audience of potentially interested users as possible. It is particularly appropriate in cases where the content is lengthy and unsuited to easy summarizing on feeds. Unlike inbound links or RSS, which "tout" the content on other destinations in the hopes of getting users to click and come to a single Web site, this system puts the entire content on multiple Web sites. The creator is thereby assured that the content, with all its nuances and details, is exposed to a wider audience than can be provided by a single destination. In so doing, some control over the presentation of the content, such as the environment, compatibility and degree of user interest, may be surrendered. This will depend on the degree of selectivity with which partnering Web sites are chosen and the terms of the partnership agreements.

Destination sites or publishers find full content syndication to be a convenient way to add valuable content that is compatible with their editorial positions and formatted to appear as if it is self-generated. Unlike with fixed-site distribution, in the case of full content syndication, the publisher is not forced to pay the entire cost of content creation. Instead, he either pays a portion of it with a licensing fee, or pays nothing but shares his ad revenue with the content creator. In either case, the risk is much lower, although the possible reward of an exclusive "big break" is eliminated as the content is shared with other publisher sites.

A further advantage of full content syndication for publishers is that the full content is likely to be more engaging to the user than syndicating a portion of the content (as is done with RSS feeds). Therefore, users are likely to spend more time on the publisher's site, which increases key publisher success metrics such as duration of user sessions, page views and ad impressions.

Full content syndication is attractive to advertisers because it provides a consistent, compatible and high-value environment for their messages, while aggregating more targeted users than a single destination can provide. Since the syndicator has done the work of selecting the partnering destinations, the advertiser avoids the effort and expense of researching and buying each separately. However, the advertiser does need to understand the criteria, procedures and controls the syndicator uses to select partners to ensure that his ads do not appear in an inappropriate environment.

Finally, for users, full content syndication facilitates the ability to find and navigate to interesting, high-quality content on Web sites that they visit. One potential downside is that a user may find the same content repeated on a number of Web sites, which could become a minor annoyance.

RSS Feeds

RSS, or Really Simple Syndication, describes a system of Web feed formats used to publish frequently updated content. RSS documents can contain either a summary of the content or the full content. Unlike typical HTML pages, which can display content on any Web browser, RSS pages only display content on feed readers. The most popular feed readers are Google Reader and My Yahoo!, but there are many others.

RSS can be considered a form of Internet Content Syndication. In fact, because full content syndication is not terribly well known among average Internet users, RSS is probably what most people consider to be Internet syndication. The key difference between RSS and full content syndication is that with RSS, the placement of content is in control of the users rather than the content creators or publishers. Another key difference is that many feed readers only display a summary of the syndicated content and include a link back to the content creator. Although some feed readers do display the entire content, it is typically altered somewhat from the original version.

For content creators, RSS is an excellent traffic generator, as it sets up an active relationship with an audience of self-selecting subscribers. Rather than navigating to a page, as with fixed-site distribution and full content syndication, in the case of RSS, the user has requested to have content delivered to his reader. If he learns of, or receives a summary of, updated information, he may click on the link and be taken to the originating Web site. One consideration for the content owner is that the summary needs to be sufficiently compelling for the user to click on the link; otherwise, users may ignore that feed. On the other hand, there are services that place ads both on the original content and on the user's aggregator, adjacent to the feed, increasing the likelihood that users will consume the content.

The advantages for the originating publisher are the same as for the content owner. The feed is a builder of high-value traffic, which can lead to increased revenue from advertising impressions. Further, revenue may be generated from ads that appear on the feeds themselves. The other party involved is the creator of the feed reader, such as Google or Yahoo!. By providing users with all the RSS content they subscribe to in one location, the feed reader can increase the duration of user sessions and sell the creator's own targeted advertising on each user's customized page.

RSS is a potentially powerful way for advertisers to aggregate a targeted audience because of the self-selected nature of the system. For example, an automotive company can place ads on a feed for auto news or car care, knowing that the users who select the feed are likely to be car enthusiasts. However, only the advertisements on the originating Web site are within a fully controlled environment. Unless ads are also available on the feed reader sites (which is a separate media buy for the advertiser), the impressions are only served when the feed is clicked on.

Of all parties involved, RSS offers users the most convenience. A feed reader allows users to customize their aggregator page exclusively with content that interests them, generally in an easy-to-read summary form.

Viral Distribution

When content creators allow any publisher to display his content free of any screening or control, viral distribution occurs. The most common examples of this are YouTube videos, which any publisher can embed on his or her Web site in a few simple steps. Most other online video services also allow for viral distribution. Widgets are also a type of content that commonly receive viral distribution. Many content creators fall victim to "content thieves;" that is, people or robots who copy and republish content without the publisher's permission, potentially violating any copyrights the content creator has. This is distinguished from viral distribution because with the latter the content creator allows other publishers to copy and republish the material.

Although many people consider it as such, viral distribution is not Internet Content Syndication. The reason for this is that there is no control of the placement, nor is there any sort of partnership between the content creator and the publisher. This is an important distinction, because not all forms of distribution qualify as syndication.

Viral distribution benefits the content creator who wants to reach a large audience and does not necessarily care about generating revenue. Certain viral distribution publishers pay royalties or share advertising revenue with content creators, but that revenue does not tend to cover the costs of content creation. Amateur filmmakers and independent widget developers are good examples of the type of content creator that benefits from viral distribution the most.

For publishers, the ability to present viral content is obviously beneficial as there is no financial cost to them and typically very little work involved. However, because it is usually not professionally produced, virally distributed content tends to be of lower quality and less interesting to users. Although this is certainly not always the case, the vast majority of online videos receive less than one thousand views. Nonetheless, it can provide a publisher's audience with an additional reason to stay on his Web site, increasing key success metrics and driving additional revenue.

For advertisers, virally distributed content tends to increase the size of their audience at the expense of a complete loss of control over the editorial environment. Their message could literally appear anywhere on the Web, including many locations that might be undesirable to them, such as a Web site about tobacco, firearms or content of a sexual nature. On the other hand, the attractiveness of viral distribution to publishers means that virally distributed content has the potential to reach a very large audience for advertisers.

Viral distribution benefits users because it allows them free access to content at any site on the World Wide Web. Because a lot of virally distributed content is "user-generated," it also encourages users to create their own content and actually become content creators.

Figure 6. Online Distribution Matrix

Distribution Model				
	Not Syndication	**Internet Content Syndication**		**Not Syndication**
	Fixed Site	**Full Content Syndication**	**RSS Feeds**	**Viral Distribution**
Content Creators	Most control Least reach Lower revenue	Slightly less control Greater reach More revenue	Content altered or summarized Self-selecting audience	Least revenue Least control Greater reach
Publishers	Highest risk Highest reward	More cost-effective Lower reward	Self-selecting audience Lose user sessions to feed readers	Lowest risk Lower reward Increase user engagement
Advertisers	Most control Most complicated media buy Most limited audience	Slightly less control Greater reach Simpler media buy	Less control Targeted audience	Least control Greater reach
Users	Most difficult to find, however, not difficult to revisit	Easier to locate Duplicate content	Simple aggregation of all content in one convenient place	Free access to content Become content creators

Conclusion

Internet Content Syndication has already proven to be a powerful solution to the problem of audience fragmentation online. By aggregating the audiences of different Web sites, it enables content owners to reach a larger audience, publishers to receive quality content at an affordable rate and advertisers to achieve targeted scale. Because of all this, content owners are able to continue to produce and update quality content, which ultimately benefits users.

As Figure 2 demonstrated, the number of Internet destinations continues to grow at an increasing rate. The Internet is unique in this way among media in that the cost of creating a new destination is much lower. Put more simply, on the Internet, anyone with a little technical knowledge and a couple hundred dollars can become a publisher. This is not possible in other media such as print, radio and television.

Because of the likely continued proliferation of unique Internet destinations, audience fragmentation is almost guaranteed to persist, and perhaps accelerate. Therefore, Internet Content Syndication is positioned to become a more important medium for all parties involved. Content creators will need it to continue to generate enough revenue to cover their costs. Publishers will need it to be able to afford high-quality content that attracts and retains an audience that either subscribes or views advertisements. Advertisers will continue to want it for its reach, controllability and simplicity. Finally, users who value high-quality content will want it to maintain the value of timely, relevant information on the Internet.

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ABOUT THE INTERNET CONTENT SYNDICATION COUNCIL

The Internet Content Syndication Council (ICSC) is a central source of information for companies that are actively engaged in Internet Content Syndication. On behalf of its members, the ICSC seeks to deliver insights that advance Internet Content Syndication as a means of revenue generation for digital publishers, as a mode of marketing for advertisers and as a system of quality content provision to consumers and networks alike. For further information on the ICSC, please visit http://www.internetsyndication.org.

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