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MLive Scores Surprise Hit With Weather

By Diana Marszalek
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The Michigan news site **MLive** is garnering a huge following around coverage of a topic usually monopolized by TV stations: weather.

With **meteorologist Mark Torregrossa** at the helm, the site's **weather section** has ballooned both in content and readers over the past two years, hitting a high of 13 million page views in January, according to Adobe SiteCatalyst numbers provided by MLive. The site attributes the spike to the particularly nasty winter, says John Hiner, MLive's VP of content.

The page, which readers throughout the state can customize based on location, is averaging 5 million to 6 million page views a month even during this more tranquil spring and early summer, Hiner says. That makes weather the fourth most popular page on the site, topped only by sections devoted to coverage of sports teams like the Detroit Lions and University of Michigan, Hiner says. MLive doesn't reveal site-wide metrics.

Hiner says the draw is bigger than he ever expected. When he first started toying with the idea of beefing up MLive's weather coverage in 2012, Hilner hoped to raise the number of weather section pageviews from roughly 100,000 a month to 1 million. That's when he hired Torregrossa, a freelance meteorologist whose most recent full-time gig was serving as chief meteorologist at NBC affiliate WEYI in Flint-Saginaw-Bay City. He also runs **farmerweather.com**, a website he founded when government-issued agriculture reports started to wane.

"I just figured that was the potential," Hiner says, adding that he believed the ability to offer real-time weather reports would be his biggest advantage. "It has wildly exceeded what I thought possible."

Hiner credits the success to Torregrossa's all-encompassing approach to covering the topic, which includes real-time video reports, analytics, input from regional weather spotters and conversations with readers about topics such as whether the climate is right for planting tomatoes.

Torregrossa also is a prolific writer on the subject, blogging about everything from climate change and fracking to whether the weekend forecast is good for a **holiday outing** or **wedding plans**. Recent stories included taking a **long-range look at the summer forecast**, spelling out the best times and places **for watching a meteor shower** and explaining the cause of a **huge bank of fog that recently hung over Lake Michigan**.

Torregrossa has an active Facebook page and is dabbling in Twitter, but his interactions with readers come more from actions such as asking questions at the ends of his posts than from social media, he says.

An Internet aficionado as well as a storm-chaser, Torregrossa says MLive's following shows the potential online media has to displace TV stations as the primary source of weather information, primarily because the platforms allow for real-time coverage.

"When there's a tornado warning issued I tell everybody go to their basement and I get into my pickup" to report on the storm, he says. "The videos of tornados rock."

"These are the kind of things you don't get to do in a 21/2-minute television weathercast," says Torregrossa.

An extra boon for MLive is that it has had to invest very little in the endeavor on top of Torregrossa's freelance salary, Hiner says.

That's because Torregrossa says he relies on the free online government weather data, which is churned out using Doppler radars and computer systems so state-of-the-art that "there is no way a TV station" could afford to buy them on their own.

"Just when I was kind of bummed out that TV is sliding downhill, I discovered, holy moly, I have the Internet and I can do it anyway I want," he says. "What I see coming in the next five years is that (when it comes to weather coverage), it will be the websites that rule."