

Fark, USA Today Deal Demonstrates Aggregation's Value in Link Economy

By [l3ahb3tan](#) • December 3, 2009

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A recent deal between a heavyweight newspaper Web site and a popular edited news aggregator site shows the increasingly blurred boundaries among social media platforms, mainstream news and blogs as a result of sharing content.

USAToday.com and Fark.com, an edited site that aggregates user-submitted links, recently launched [a new partnership](#). As part of the deal, USAToday.com's Tech section is the exclusive host and sponsor of [Fark.com's Geek page](#), and USA Today manages the advertising placements on the page, according to the statement released when the partnership was announced.

Fark.com's Geek page shows aggregated technology news headlines from other news sources with USA Today's Tech section branding. The Geek page's right rail displays USAToday.com's Tech content with a video player of the newspaper's Tech video clips and a headline widget of USAToday.com's Tech Live and Game Hunters stories.

Brian Dresher, USAToday.com's acquisition marketing manager who put the deal together, said in a phone interview that there's an expectation among savvy social media users that news will find them where they are, and that this partnership helps USAToday.com reach those users.

Dresher said they want to see growth in the USAToday.com's Tech section with a non-USAToday.com audience as a result of the site links in the right rail of the Fark partner page.

Drew Curtis, founder of Fark.com, said this is his site's first content partnership with a major media brand. He previously had a sales-only deal with Maxim Online, he told me in a phone

interview.

USAToday.com's Tech section front has a box at the bottom promoting the partner site. Dresher said the partner page is also promoted in the USAToday.com homepage rotator.

Without citing specific traffic data, Dresher said they are happy with the results they have seen so far since launch Nov. 24. He added that was a difficult traffic week to gauge with the Thanksgiving holiday. USAToday.com had 9.7 million unique visitors in October, according to figures provided by communications manager Alexandra Nicholson.

Curtis said Fark.com gets up to 2,500 user-submitted links daily. He said they block duplicates to keep the review process at a manageable level, but otherwise would be getting 50,000 links daily. He said Fark.com has high repeat visits per user.

"It's a dedicated audience of really intelligent individuals," Curtis said.

Other media companies have launched pages or sections of aggregated content based on location or topic on their Web sites.

ChicagoBreakingNews.com's Neighborhood News Pages, powered by Outside.In, aggregates content by location. The Wall Street Journal's business and law sections include aggregated headlines on these topics with widgets powered by OneSpot. The Web site for "The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer" used the collaborative journalism site Publish 2 to aggregate reaction stories after President Barack Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

A few things make the deal between USAToday.com and Fark.com stand out. One is the pairing of a news powerhouse with an edited aggregation site that has surged beyond its cult following by word of mouth.

Unlike aggregated sections on other news sites where editors can add, omit or suppress aggregator source story feeds or a single story itself, the Fark.com links on the co-branded page are curated by Fark.

Dresher said USAToday.com has no editorial control over those links in the main headline spill of the partner page, but has faith in Fark's curatorial decisions.

Curtis said curse words don't appear in headlines because asterisks are used to blank them out and they don't link to not-safe-for-work (NSFW) headlines on Fark.com's main page or any other page on the site. He said this type of content is on a separate site called Foobies.com.

He said the last NSFW news-related link on the Fark.com home page was to the Huffington Post in April and that Oct 19, 2005 was the last time Fark.com linked directly to nudity from the site's home page.

"It's a common misconception that Fark links out to NSFW content, I hear it all the time," he said. "The USAToday deal doesn't require us to do anything we don't normally already do."

Another noteworthy aspect of the deal is that Fark.com's aggregated headlines are user-submitted, then the curated headlines appear on Fark.com and are labeled with topic tags (i.e. scary, amusing, etc.).

Users can install a button on their own sites and remotely submit links to Fark.com, and then these submissions are used to balance Fark.com's editorial main page postings with what users want to see, according to Fark.com.

FarkIt submissions are queued in a separate database from user link submissions, and sites that install and prominently display the FarkIt button on their page get listing preference, according to the site.

By contrast, third-party aggregator tools used by some news Web sites have headlines automatically pulled in from the provider's trusted feed sources and then a news editor chooses from the aggregation provider's curatorial tool whether or not to use those sources or a particular story blog post.

But is USAToday.com's Tech content niche enough for the savvy Fark.com audience?

Mindy McAdams, the Knight Chair Professor of Journalism at the University of Florida, said USAToday.com is for a general audience and Fark.com is the opposite. In a phone interview, she questioned whether Fark users would learn something from USAToday.com's Tech section because geek types have news feeds to follow what they're interested in.

Fark.com's Curtis said his readers are likely to click and read a specific article. "They consume

news a la carte. In general, they're willing to give anything a shot provided it's useful."

Will more news Web sites use aggregation on their sites? It certainly could be a win-win for a news organization, which is thin on resources to cover news, but could afford someone to curate an aggregation tool that pulls in relevant content for them. The question then is, will media companies put a skilled editor behind the aggregation?

McAdams said that more news sites are using aggregation because they'll try anything, but that's not a business model.

"If they're looking at aggregation as a strategy, it's kind of hard to do with no personnel," she said. "Good aggregation requires human intelligence ... the whole idea of curation is you've got a human who knows something about the subject matter."

CORRECTION: This piece originally said USAToday.com reaches a combined 6.1 million readers daily. That combined figure reflects USA Today print readership and online readership.