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Web Words That Lure the Readers

By **CLAIRE CAIN MILLER** from New York Times

¶The [Huffington Post](#) has hired veteran journalists to beef up its news coverage. But a significant chunk of its readers come instead for articles like one published this week: “Chelsy Davy & Prince Harry: So Happy Together?”

¶The two-sentence article was just a vehicle for a slide show of photographs of the couple and included no actual news. But “Chelsy Davy” was one of the top searches on Google that day, and soon after the article was published it became one of the first links that popped up in Google’s search results.

¶It was an example of an art and science at which The Huffington Post excels: search engine optimization, or S.E.O. The term covers a wide range of behind-the-scenes tactics for getting search engine users to visit a Web site, like choosing story topics based on popular searches.

¶Because Google is many Internet users’ front door to the Web, S.E.O. has become an obsession for many Web publishers, and successful ones use the strategies to varying degrees. But as newspapers, magazines, blogs and online-only news sites increasingly compete for readers, they are making it more of a priority than ever and adopting new techniques, like trying to maximize pass-alongs on social networks.

¶The Huffington Post’s skill at using these tactics to increase readership and revenue was one of the ways it made itself worth \$315 million to AOL, which acquired it this week. And Demand Media, which runs sites like [eHow](#) and [Answerbag.com](#) and values search engine optimization perhaps more than any other publisher, raised \$151 million in a public offering in January.

¶Models like these could pave the route toward profitable journalism in a postprint world, some analysts say — or, others worry, drive online media to publish low-quality articles that are written to appeal to search engines instead of people.

¶S.E.O. is “absolutely essential,” said Rich Skrenta, chief executive of the search engine Blekko. Still, he said, it can turn into a “heroin drip” for publishers: “They had this really good content at the beginning, but they realize the more S.E.O. they do, the more money they make, and the pressure really pushes down the quality on their sites.”

¶There is a whole industry of search engine optimization and social media experts, and many of them have found jobs at Web publishers. Their standard strategies include things like filling articles with keywords that people might search for, writing teaser headlines that people cannot help but click on and including copious links to other stories on the same site.

¶In addition to writing articles based on trending Google searches, The Huffington Post writes headlines like a popular one this week, “Watch: [Christina Aguilera](#) Totally Messes Up National Anthem.” It amasses often-searched phrases at the top of articles, like the 18 at the top of the one about Ms. Aguilera, including “Christina Aguilera National Anthem” and “Christina Aguilera [Super Bowl](#).”

¶As a result of techniques like these, 35 percent of The Huffington Post’s visits in January came from search engines, compared to 20 percent for [CNN.com](#), according to Hitwise, a Web analysis firm.

¶Mario Ruiz, a spokesman for The Huffington Post, said search engine optimization played a role on the site but declined to discuss how it was used.

¶Though traditional print journalists might roll their eyes at picking topics based on Google searches, the articles can actually be useful for readers. The problem, analysts say, is when Web sites publish articles just to get clicks, without offering any real payoff for readers.

¶“You’re not really crossing the line if you’re creating content for the sake of disseminating information, like HuffPo,” said Vivek Wadhwa, visiting scholar at the School of Information at the [University of California, Berkeley](#). “The problem is these other players producing content based on what people click on.”

¶Those publishers, which many dismissively refer to as content farms, include Demand Media, Yahoo’s Associated Content and AOL’s Seed.

¶Demand Media uses software that looks at activity on search engines, Facebook and Twitter; generates headlines based on it; and assigns freelancers to write corresponding pieces. The result is articles like “How to Lose Weight in Your Face,” which is a top Google result for related searches and includes tips like “drink plenty of water.”

¶But that approach might not be so effective for long. In recent weeks, there has been swelling criticism in technology circles of these types of Web sites, and of Google for listing the articles as top results.

¶Blekko, a search engine that limits results to an edited list of sites, removed all links to eHow and Answerbag. Google said it was working on changes that would push such links lower in search results.

¶“We definitely have heard feedback in the last two weeks that people are concerned about the low-quality content farms in Google, and we’re working on a variety of algorithms to try to address that,” Matt Cutts, a principal engineer at Google who leads the Web spam team, said in an interview. He declined to single out any specific sites.

¶A Demand Media spokeswoman would not comment because the company was in a mandatory quiet period after its stock offering, but Richard Rosenblatt, its chief executive, has said that Google’s planned changes are not directed at its sites and that his company helps Google fill gaps in content.

¶Google blocks or penalizes sites that violate its guidelines, like including hidden text or loading up pages with irrelevant keywords, practices known as black hat S.E.O. (as opposed to the white hat variety). But Mr. Cutts acknowledged that some sites might not qualify as spam but could still annoy users.

¶“One piece of advice I give to S.E.O. masters is, don’t chase after Google’s algorithm, chase after your best interpretation of what users want, because that’s what Google’s chasing after,” he said.

¶The ultimate prize for most Web publishers is loyal readers who go directly to their site, without passing through a search engine. They are more likely to visit on a regular basis and stick around.

¶Some Web publishers say that these days, the most effective way to build that following is to find readers on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, an approach known as social media optimization. That could improve the quality of articles, they say, because the best way to get links on Twitter is to write a story people want to share with friends.

¶“Search is, in my mind, yesterday’s story,” said Lewis Dvorkin, chief product officer at Forbes, which recently redesigned its Web site to make it more social.

¶“You’re finding that today’s audience is much more interested in the filter of their colleagues and friends who they trust than an algorithm produced by someone else.”

¶The Huffington Post also incorporates social media by doing things like running Twitter posts about breaking news alongside the articles.

¶These techniques blend traditional journalistic instincts with an Internet business model, and they are paying off for sites that use them, said Joshua Benton, director of the Nieman Journalism Lab at [Harvard University](#).

“HuffPo went from being extremely focused on tactics that a lot of news organizations didn’t like, but they’ve started making money, built up an audience, and now they’re moving into more sophisticated territory,” he said. “What they’ve been successful at is creating the kind of brand that other sites have or would love to have, so that people want to type in ‘Huffington Post’ in their browser.”