Learfield and the Early Internet, 1995–2002

The internet arrived at Learfield less as a grand strategy than as a series of hunches, demos, memos, and improvised experiments. By the mid-1990s, the company knew enough to sense that something important was happening, but not enough to know what shape that importance would take. That uncertainty turns out to be part of the story.

In the beginning, the web did not look like destiny. It looked like one more tool, maybe useful, maybe not, in a company built around radio networks, affiliate relations, and ad-supported programming. The work underway at the time was practical and familiar: trying to build a low-cost alternative to the Associated Press for affiliated broadcasters. BBSs and CompuServe were already part of the landscape, but the web still felt peripheral. Then, in 1995, a demo from University of Missouri tech people made the whole thing suddenly seem less abstract. Netscape Navigator appeared on the screen, and the future became easier to imagine. [file:12]

That first phase has a quality that now feels almost quaint: intelligent people trying to reason their way into a medium no one yet understood. The response was not to hire a polished digital consultancy or commission a five-year plan. Instead, contact was made with Mike McKean at the Missouri School of Journalism, who pointed toward Dan Arnall, who brought along Allen Hammock. Between them they had the technical confidence, youthful nerve, and opportunism the moment required. Before long they had formed Echo Communications, and Learfield had found its guides into the web era. [file:12]

Clyde Lear seems, in retrospect, to have understood the opportunity in exactly the right incomplete way. His 1995 memo did not pretend clarity. It said, in effect: this may matter; some of our existing properties seem suited to it; the business model is unclear; we should gather smart people and think. That is not the language of certainty. It is the language of a company that knows it is early. A meeting at the Lake of the Ozarks followed, and Learfield began registering domains and hand-coding websites for its various properties. [file:12]

The Mark Cuban episode reads now like one of those stories history loves to turn into a fable. In September 1995 Cuban called because he wanted Indiana basketball on the internet, and Learfield owned the rights. The later details are almost too on the nose: the Kansas City meeting, the whiteboard, the offer to sell 10 percent of AudioNet for what seemed then like serious money, the inability to see why the arrangement was indispensable, and the eventual Yahoo acquisition for $5.7 billion. But the interesting part is not that Learfield failed to become rich off Mark Cuban. Almost nobody, placed where Learfield stood in 1995, would have seen clearly enough to do otherwise. The real significance is that the company was close enough to the edge of events to have the conversation at all. [file:12]

There is a difference between being foolish and being early. Much of what Learfield tried in those years lands, from a distance, in that second category. The company and AudioNet struck an agreement for live internet distribution of college sports, with RealAudio streams and ad-revenue splits, while Learfield also started promoting its own websites on air. None of this was frictionless. News staff resented sacrificing airtime to web promos, and affiliates had every

reason to prefer listeners stay with local stations rather than migrate to a network site. The internet was not simply an opportunity; it was also a disturbance in the settled economics and habits of broadcast radio. [file:12]

Then came Straylight, one of those names that perfectly captures the era: cyberpunk-adjacent, slightly grandiose, convinced the future could be organized if only the right software existed. Gamecruiser, chat rooms, fan pages, statistics, audience tracking, ad targeting, and eventually AdActive all represented attempts to imagine what sports listening and advertising might become online. Some of the ideas were not bad. Some were early in exactly the wrong way. AdActive, the "intelligent ad banner," assumed advertisers would welcome more nuanced audience response and that users might engage with ads rather than simply endure or ignore them. In hindsight, the product was not absurd; it was merely ahead of the culture, ahead of the tooling, and perhaps ahead of what advertisers were willing to know. By the end of 1998, Straylight was gone. [file:12]

That failure does not read as wasted effort. It reads more like tuition. Learfield learned that starting internet companies and building proprietary software products were not the same thing as operating radio networks. Ballot Box, the vote-tabulation project built with The Des Moines Register, drove the lesson home even more harshly when election night turned into an embarrassment. These episodes clarified the boundary between what the company was good at and what it only hoped to become. [file:12]

What followed was less glamorous and more durable. Rather than trying to win the internet in some general sense, Learfield began looking for niche advantages hidden inside the businesses it already understood. The key question became: what do we have access to that others do not? That shift in emphasis produced the most interesting projects of the period. Legislature.com streamed Missouri House and Senate debate to legislators, lobbyists, and anyone else who needed to monitor the floor from outside the chamber. Supreme Court oral arguments were put online for another narrow but real audience. Missouri Highway Patrol crash reports, once thought impossible to put on the web, became a heavily used public resource. ObitsOnline gathered funeral notices into a searchable database at a time when that still felt novel. These were not moonshots. They were specific acts of translation: taking information Learfield could already gather or access and making it available in a new form. [file:12]

A pattern emerged. Learfield would prove that some neglected category of information could be useful on the web, invest time and ingenuity in making it work, and then watch the original content owner absorb the lesson and offer a free version directly. That happened with legislative audio and Supreme Court arguments, and the same shape appears elsewhere in the narrative. It is tempting to read this only as frustration, but it also suggests Learfield had become, for a while, a practical research-and-development lab for other institutions too cautious or technically limited to experiment on their own. [file:12]

The company's more enduring success may have been cultural rather than entrepreneurial. By the turn of the century, the internet no longer needed to justify its existence inside Learfield. It had become obvious that advertisers wanted help with websites and content, that digital services could strengthen existing radio relationships, and that web development made sense as added value attached to larger ad buys. That insight was humbler than the startup dream but better aligned with the company's actual strengths. It also led to lasting infrastructure: Andy

Waschick's work, Gestalt, custom tools like CATS, MCAL, and SALT, and eventually the move toward lower-cost platforms such as WordPress. [file:12]

Seen from the present, the most striking thing about this history is not that Learfield missed a fortune or built a killer app that never quite killer-apped. It is that a regional media company in Jefferson City was willing to spend years feeling its way through a technological fog without demanding immediate certainty. There was confusion, overreach, misplaced bets, and some expensive education. But there was also curiosity, institutional tolerance, and an unusual willingness to let people chase odd ideas long enough to see whether they contained a business.

For the person leading much of this effort, the story also has a quieter emotional arc. It is a story about being allowed to occupy a role that did not really exist yet, then trying to justify that freedom by making one experiment after another useful to the parent company. It is about moving from the fantasy of launching the next big thing toward a more mature understanding of service: helping an existing organization adapt, however awkwardly, to a changing world. That may not be the mythology the internet likes best. But it is probably the truer one.

By 2002, the internet had ceased to be a speculative side project and had become part of Learfield's operating reality. Not all the experiments worked. Some failed outright. Some were co-opted by the institutions whose material Learfield had helped put online. Some turned into support services instead of standalone businesses. Yet taken together, they amount to something more interesting than success or failure. They show what it looked like when an analog company, staffed by radio people, met the web early enough to be surprised by it and stubborn enough to keep trying anyway. [file:12]