

Changes Planned to 'The Oil Drum'

As many readers know, I write for The Oil Drum, a website about Energy and Our Future. The Oil Drum is currently undertaking changes in content and in how the staff are organized. I was not part of the group developing the changes, but I would like to offer my second-hand perspective. Let me start first with two things that I see as impetus for change: (1) Changing External Situation and (2) Internal Organizational Issues.

Changing External Situation

One of the issues that seems to be driving the change is the fact that the peak oil in conventional oil production is more and more in the rear view mirror. Because of this, we are getting increasingly close to the situation where serious disruptions may start taking place. In addition, it is becoming more and more certain that there is no way of fixing the situation that will allow us to maintain our current lifestyles.

The question becomes, "What should The Oil Drum write about?" Writing more and more about what may be ahead, when this situation may be quite bleak, alienates a lot of readers and may lead to rash actions by a few. But writing about proposed solutions, as if they will work, when there is serious doubt about this by many staff members is not really an acceptable approach either.

The approach that seems to have been selected to solve this dilemma is to narrow the focus of the site—although I am not sure how much narrowing will take place in practice. The view seems to be that if the site sticks to analytical posts about energy, it can stay out of difficult questions, such as whether a collapse might occur and what readers should do to prepare.

Internal Organizational Issues

On a site such The Oil Drum, nearly everyone would like a say in decision-making. Many have thought that I have had too much power. My power was actually considerably less than what one might expect based on the wording of the Oil Drum staff member listing—with me being the only one listed as Editor of the main web site—because The Oil Drum is really a subsidiary of Institute for Study of Energy and Our Future (ISEOF). The board of ISEOF oversees the operation of The Oil Drum, so I received a fair amount of direction from board members regarding what types of posts to run, including advice on some individual posts. I also have had the assistance of an assistant editor, who helped me particularly with guest posts.

This organization has had some difficulties. For one thing, it was difficult to turn down problem posts from staff members, unless the problem was really egregious. The most I could do was help the author improve the proposed post.

I don't think there was ever any real intent to have only one person listed as editor—it just happened that way, as other people had less time, or didn't want that much responsibility.

Now other Oil Drum staff members would like more “say” in what posts are accepted. Some feel that I have been writing too many posts (even if editors have always had to write a certain number of administrative-type posts). Some think that some posts by staff members are not of adequate quality, and there has not been a good way of turning those posts down. Some do not like particular types of posts (news related posts, or interviews, or transcribed videos, or reports on conferences). And as mentioned previously, there is the belief that the scope of the site needs to be narrowed somewhat, in view of where we are now relative to peak oil.

The New Plan

The new plan was developed by a group of people, including Nate Hagens (an ISOEF board member), SuperG (another ISOEF member), Euan Mearns and others. I was not included in the group. Leanan has been an endorser of the plan. There has been at least one previous attempt at reorganization, which never was implemented, so the idea of reorganization has been discussed for a long time.

The plan is to run only “higher quality” posts. How “higher quality” is defined is a sticking point, since nearly everyone seems to have a different view. As I understand the situation, the decision as to what is a higher quality post will be left open to the individual editor.

The plan would require staff members to submit proposed articles to a board of eight (or nine) editors, including me. Each editor will be able to vote to accept or reject a post. There are rules as to how many votes are required for acceptance, and how many votes are needed for rejection (a smaller number than for acceptance), and what happens in the case of a “tie”. I understand there will also be a box to write in suggested changes.

It is expected that there will be fewer posts published each week, partly because of the narrowed range of Oil Drum content, and partly because posts which are not considered “higher quality” would be rejected.

I understand that there will also be a paid staff member who will monitor the comment thread and have some other responsibilities.

I understand that at some point, Leanan is planning to cut back on the number of days per week that she will do Drumbeat. The plan is that on Monday through Friday, some type of content will be provided—either Drumbeat or a new post, but not necessarily both.

My reactions

I will have to admit that I have been less than happy about the proposed changes. This kind of change is difficult for those involved in the process.

I hope that content will not be cut back too much. It is easy to try to target some imaginary “higher level” reader, but it seems to me that The Oil Drum needs to have posts for real world people, too.

Furthermore, all posts don’t need to be “innovative”. We need to build some redundancy into the system, so that readers who miss major information in a post two years ago aren’t permanently cut off from those ideas.

I expect that more staff members, including myself, will have their own blogs, and The Oil Drum will publish, some, but not all, of these posts. There is an advantage to this, because even now, there are topics The Oil Drum does not write about.

A big part of what makes The Oil Drum special is the willingness of staff members to share information and to work together on posts. I would not like to lose this.

I think The Oil Drum is important, and I have said I will continue to try to make it work. So I hope the new system can be worked out, even though I didn’t have a part in putting it together.

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