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An exploration of multimedia journalism through a multi-platform storytelling website

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An Exploration of Multimedia Journalism
through a Multi-Platform Storytelling Website

A Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
School of Media Arts and Design
James Madison University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by Lani Finley Furbank
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Accepted by the faculty of the School of Media Arts and Design, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

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Introduction

If you mention journalism, many will tell you that it is a dying field. But these people don’t give journalism nearly enough credit. The era of print newspapers or nightly news bulletins may be waning, but journalism as a discipline can never die. Journalism has a unique and noble responsibility – to inform the public about the major issues and events of their time. No matter what shape this takes, it is still journalism. So to those who say that journalism is dying – I counter that it is not a dying field. It is a changing field. Our technology is changing. The demands of our audience are changing. The speed with which we can disseminate information is changing. But the craft of journalism will always be necessary and people will always look to it to find the truth.

However, this does not mean that newspapers, magazines and television stations are not facing challenges in our changing world. They are struggling to keep up with citizen journalists and bloggers, they are fighting to win viewers and ratings and they must work even faster to break a story. If media outlets broaden their scope of coverage beyond just print or broadcast, their coverage will be more competitive, more comprehensive and more accessible (Lim 2012). The web is the best way to broaden this scope.

Most media outlets do have a web presence. In fact, you would be hard pressed to find one without a basic website. A brief, informal survey of television station websites revealed that most are not typically publishing content on their websites that is different from the original story that was printed or aired. Some, like WHSV in Harrisonburg, simply post scripts from their broadcast stories on the web (“WHSV Home Page”). Others, like WJLA in Washington, D.C. and WABC in New York, rewrite their broadcast stories to add more detail (“WJLA Home Page;” “WABC Home Page”). All three of these stations, and many others, simply cut their
video pieces from the news broadcast and post that footage online to accompany the story. This approach does not serve the public because it does not provide new information.

Prominent print publications – such as The New York Times and The Washington Post – have delved deeper into online coverage to diversify their print content. The New York Times has done some very compelling work with interactive infographics in particular (Abramson). Its look at “The Year in Graphics” showcases how its reporters tell stories via this platform (The New York Times). One story, about an avalanche in Washington, takes a unique form (Branch). The story unfolds as you scroll down the page, revealing a mixture of text, images, video clips and infographics. The Washington Post has also translated its stories from print to online with the use of video on its channel, “The Fold” (“About the Fold”). This channel houses mini features or news packages to supplement content that has been published in print or on the web.

ESPN’s “Outside the Lines” has also developed its online stories in unique ways (“Outside the Lines”). One feature piece about Charlie Wittmack, a man who designed and attempted a world triathalon, is effectively designed with full screen images peppered with text and video clips (Drehs). The chronology of the piece flows as you click through each image.

While there are some exemplary instances of diverse online content to supplement the original print or broadcast pieces, these are few and far between. This could be a result of the fact that financial resources at media outlets across the country are sometimes limited. However, diversifying content to introduce new and dynamic web content doesn’t require a large budget. Multi-platform storytelling can be a low-cost addition to a news station’s website simply by retraining reporters to think holistically about a story, instead of only reporting on one narrow angle.
The importance of being a multi-platform storyteller has been impressed upon me throughout my college career. Many journalists in the field today may not have been so lucky, as their education took place during a time when a simple news broadcast was enough to satisfy viewers. Now, with shorter attention spans, more content on more platforms and a faster moving flow of information, a diverse skill set is necessary to remain competitive in the field of journalism – not just for reporters, but also for stations.

My project aimed to identify the qualities that contribute to a superb media website, and to recreate these elements in two phases. After reviewing a variety of news sources and their websites, I concluded that exemplary web content is created in such a way that it takes the original story and repurposes it to give it new meaning and context for the audience. In many cases, this means adding a new platform – taking a print story and making it a video piece, a photo slide show or an infographic. In other cases, it means delivering new content via the same platform – providing raw footage of an interview to give a more complete picture of a video story, adding a transcript of an interview to accompany a print story or simply telling a story from another subject’s perspective. Combining these two methods allows news outlets to diversify their content to serve their audience by informing, educating and entertaining.

The first phase of my project was designed to explore the ways in which journalists can take a single story idea or concept and transform it into a variety of different stories spun off from the original idea. Often, these spin offs can use the same information or footage, framed in a new way, to give the audience a fresh perspective. The purpose of understanding and creating these stories was to hone my journalistic skills in a variety of platforms. After trying this enterprising approach myself, I began phase two: implementing the project on a broader scale by passing on what I learned to other students. I chose to work with the advanced broadcast
journalism course, SMAD 409: Broadcast News Producing and Editing. Over the course of one semester, I guided the students through creating four websites based on four topics relating to the Harrisonburg community. Each website and topic contained multiple pieces telling the broader story from different angles.

With the skills and knowledge I learned from this project, I feel more competitive as a journalist. Learning about multi-platform storytelling has resulted in a greater understanding of how to keep audiences coming back for new angles and stories.
Methodology

I began my project by selecting a series of elements to implement to best tell my story online. As mentioned above, I looked at a series of superb websites and used their content as inspiration to fuel my project design. One website in particular, “Black Gold Boom,” uses audio, photographs, video and text to tell the complex story of the oil industry in North Dakota from a variety of angles (Melby). It has a 20-minute documentary that is organized into nine chapters and it has several print pieces and audio clips to tell the stories of the characters involved in the industry. Each of these stories is unique and fascinating in its own way. The option to view the content in a segmented manner or as a whole experience gives readers flexibility to explore the story at their own pace. The combination of these factors resulted in the site winning a Sigma Delta Chi national journalism award from the Society of Professional Journalists in the “Specialized Journalism Site” category.

Using the example of this website and others, I chose to create the following elements for my website:

- Soundslides slideshow: Photo slideshow timed to match a variety of audio clips.
- Long-form broadcast packages: 2-4 minute pieces using sound bites from subjects, natural sound and a reporter track to tell a feature story.
- Natural sound package: 2-4 minute pieces using only sound bites from subjects and natural sound to tell a feature story.
- Photos: Snapshots taken at a variety of locations to set as backgrounds and accents for the website.
- Raw video clips: Unedited clips of interviews to give the audience a look at what subjects have to say about certain complex topics.
With these elements in mind, I chose a topic for my project: water quality in the Shenandoah Valley. To begin phase one, I did preliminary research online and interviewed experts about rivers and streams in Virginia. I specifically inquired about urban areas and animal agriculture in the Shenandoah Valley and the impact these two large sectors have on the Chesapeake Bay. Through this research, I gained a broad understanding of the issue of water quality in our region, and learned how a variety of factors (namely, human impact and animal agriculture) influence the watershed.

After researching the topic thoroughly, I began to interview farmers, government employees and water quality activists about their experiences with rivers and streams in the Shenandoah Valley. Some of these interviews were video interviews and others were audio interviews. Government and activist sources for the interviews included people from the following departments: Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Shenandoah Valley Soil and Water Conservation District, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Harrisonburg Parks and Recreation Department and Harrisonburg Public Works Department.

I visited farms to film and photograph animal production operations and environmental conservation practices, and I attended events that were intended to promote awareness about water quality or to implement conservation practices on farms.

After collecting all of my information and media, I began to produce the content for my web page. Over the course of the semester, I created a variety of video packages (including a natural sound package), a Soundslides slideshow, short video clips and photo backgrounds for the website.
I then worked with a template from Wix to design my webpage using the photos I had taken to clearly and concisely showcase my content. Finally, I uploaded the content I had produced to the website to create a comprehensive look at water quality in the Shenandoah Valley. The URL for the webpage is: http://lanifurbank.wix.com/thevalleyswater. A few screenshots of the site are included in the appendix.

After completing phase one, I moved on to phase two – the implementation of the project with students in SMAD 409. This portion of the project took place over the course of one semester. I introduced my project purpose and goals to the class at the start of the semester, and set a series of deadlines throughout to guide them through the process of creating content over the course of the semester. I helped the students select topics that were broad enough to support a breadth of stories, and then encouraged them to gather content and do research to prepare for their assigned content. This content was a pared down version of the content I created in phase one: a Soundslides slideshow, a broadcast package and a natural sound package. The final step in their process was to design a Wix website for their content. Ideally, these web projects will be posted on the SMAD homepage as one cohesive unit of in-depth explorations of topics in the Shenandoah Valley.
Discussion

The purpose of multi-platform journalism is to repurpose stories from their original print or broadcast form, transforming them into pieces that take a look at an issue from a different angle or perspective. This concept, if implemented properly and efficiently, can dramatically improve the web content for both print and broadcast news outlets because it will generate more viewer interest than simply republishing the original content online.

This method of telling a broader story instead of a specific story certainly takes more forethought, but it does not necessarily take more time or resources. When journalists set out to cover a story, they typically gather a great deal of information – interviews, photos, information, transcripts, audio, video and more. Because of the time and space constraints of both broadcast and print journalism, much of this content never makes it to the newscast or to the paper for audiences to see or read. Taking this content and using it as inspiration for a new story does not require extra reporting, it simply requires additional storytelling and time to fully develop the idea. If a reporter goes out on an assignment to work toward an end goal of creating multiple stories, not just one, then news outlets can reap the benefits of stories from a variety of angles on the same issue. This does require journalists to have the skills to gather audio, visual and print content, however, which means it is important to be a jack of all trades in our changing news environment.

The training to be able to skillfully manage multi-platform storytelling begins at the university level, which is why this project was so critical for SMAD students. The SMAD department has always done a superb job of preparing students for the professional field of journalism. As the field continues to change, SMAD will continue to stay on top providing students with the resources necessary to meet the demands of news outlets. This project is just
one example of how students can be part of the force that is changing the news landscape, instead of trying to catch up after the fact.

While at times I found it challenging to remain dedicated to one topic for a long period of time, I managed to showcase a variety of angles relating to water quality in the Shenandoah Valley. For a media outlet’s coverage, it is unlikely that each story would have such an in-depth exploration. Instead, a reporter might create one package for air, and then reframe it slightly for the web – through another slightly longer package or through photos or audio clips. This would allow a wider understanding of the topic for the audience without the reporter becoming overwhelmed.

In my reporting, I found the training and mindset I mentioned earlier to be incredibly useful. The ability to think ahead to gather more content than necessary for a news package or a newspaper gave me the flexibility to take the story in new directions. For instance, while covering story, I took high-quality photos at each site I visited. These photos came in handy not just for Soundslides slideshows, but for enhancing the website itself in the form of background or accent images. I also thought that raw interview clips were an effective way to eliminate the middleman in the flow of information, simply allowing the viewer to listen to what experts had to say about an issue. These pieces were successful in showing different sides of the story in addition to the more traditional package-type pieces.

In replicating this assignment with a class of 14 broadcast journalism students, I worked to help them manage their workflow of a semester-long project on top of their weekly newscast assignments. As mentioned, the deadlines I set for them gave them benchmarks of where they should be in order to give them enough time to successfully complete the project. They spent the
first few weeks researching, and then delved into their topics, dividing the work amongst themselves and converging to design and complete the website.

The students’ topics were as follows:

• Dance culture in the Shenandoah Valley
• Green energy in the Shenandoah Valley
• The diverse cultures of refugee populations in Harrisonburg
• How the Harrisonburg economy is affected by the JMU student population

The final goal for the project was to compile these websites to represent a station or newspaper’s website. Ideally, their website would have a number of basic stories, but would also expand upon a few top stories to give their audience a more in-depth look at key topics.
Conclusion

I believe that this project was an invaluable experience for my professional development as a broadcast journalist. Independently filming, photographing, recording, reporting, editing and designing a project of this scope and magnitude allowed me to gain an understanding of how I manage large endeavors. I am confident that with this sort of training under my belt, I can continue to build on my multi-platform storytelling to become a valuable asset as a multimedia practitioner at a television station or an environmental nonprofit organization.

This project has also given me a glimpse into the world of teaching journalism in a university setting. I know a little bit more about what it takes to lead a class through an assignment, and I can see the shortcomings of teaching only the traditional approach to journalism. I believe that these skills – enterprising multiple angles from one story, and designing a dynamic website to display them online – should be taught to all journalism students, because they will soon be considered standard fare in the field. In order to remain competitive, students need to hone a variety of skills.
Agriculture Page:

The Valley's Water

Water and Agriculture

Agriculture is a diverse industry that affects water quality in a variety of ways...

- Farmers Practicing Livestock Exclusion
  Find out how livestock exclusion improves water quality near farms.

- The Challenges Farmers Face
  Local farmers discuss their agriculture operations.

- Planting a Riparian Buffer
  Volunteers plant trees along a stream bank.

Glossary:

The Valley's Water

Glossary

Confused yet? Don’t worry. Here are some definitions and explanations from the experts.
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