

Conference 2003: Digital Storytelling

Digital Storytelling: Combining the Old and the New with Digital Media

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Abstract

The development of digital media has revolutionised the world of journalism. The digital frontier is a dynamic new space for storytelling. Digital technology has meant investigative journalists have more information at their fingertips than ever before. In a changing media industry with the growth of converged newsrooms, journalists are expected to use print, broadcast and web journalism to produce the best story possible, using a variety of delivery systems to reach the widest possible audience. This presentation tackles the difficulties facing journalism educators, who need to keep up with the changes in the digital world, but at the same time, deliver fundamental journalism skills to tomorrow's reporters. The presentation looks at combining the old and the new while giving students the opportunity to learn real industry skills by delivering their stories for new media outlets.

Today's journalism graduate needs to move with the times in entering an ever evolving communication labour market. Whilst journalism graduates need to learn traditional generic skills, they also need new skills in order to compete in a highly competitive marketplace.

Graduates need digital literacy and to be technically competent. They need to be able to research a story, not simply by using the conventional shoe leather and a good contact book, but to employ research tools such as the internet, email, CAR (Computer Assisted Reporting) and to produce a story which is not just text driven. They need to learn how to deliver a story across multiple platforms: radio, video and text.

News, as we all know, is a commodity. There is an insatiable appetite for news globally, fuelled, in part, by the big event stories such as the Kosovo conflict, the Iraq war, the September 11 terrorism attacks on the World Trade Centre. The reporting of war represents profiteering and competition in terms of profit for media moguls.

Here's what Rupert Murdoch had to say during an ABC interview when explaining recently how FoxTel fared so well with a \$1.8 billion profit. He conceded the 24-hour coverage of the Iraqi war played an important role in that profit.

"Well, CNN of course, when we were beating them before the Iraq war, said wait for it to come and we'll show how superior they are and of course, we whipped their arse." Tomorrow's graduates are faced with this sort of market where news is being reduced to 'content' and therefore often undervalued.

So the role of the journalism educator is to ensure that not only are these new skills delivered, but they are not delivered to students to the detriment of the traditional journalistic values such as: the responsibility to act as a watchdog, to seek the truth and tell it as fully as possible.

A University is an ideal place in which to be able to deliver the practical and theoretical underpinnings of both. This often means, as an educator, however, you are outside of your own comfort zone and in unfamiliar territory. Keeping up with technology means predicting what tomorrow's media industry will want. Not to mention understanding things like XLR protectors and the difference in radio microphones and lavalier lapel mikes.

As Marshall McLuhan said, decades before the words 'digital literacy' became in vogue, the medium is the message.

Today's consumer not only reads 'news' but engages in news interactives' for example in the New York Times online, with a tap of a keyboard into a video or photographs and audio news features. Consumers are invited to 'roll over' photos, for example on MSNBC News, of Saddam's inner circle to learn about the men behind Iraq 's former dictator. We can now know, if we look up the Chicago Tribune online, what it might be like to stand in the batter's box facing a hard-throwing young pitcher, according to Associate Professor Rich Gordon, chair of the new media program at Northwestern University , who, gave this interactive example in his new book on digital storytelling. We, in Hobart, could follow the example of a small paper in Washington state. The local government was trying to make decisions on waterfront development. It created an interactive game allowing citizens to choose the types of developments they wanted.

Graphics are now called infographics. There are endless debates about how, for example, to make graphics of the World Trade Centre towers and the collision of the two planes less clinical than they would have been in a conventional newspaper. And to think it was only ten years ago, we were celebrating the use of colour in our newspaper photos and graphics.

Tomorrow's consumer will be reading stories on electronic paper which can show updateable text and moving images. Within the next five years, it is predicted this technology may be used in cell phones, digital watches and electronic books.

At Columbia University, engineers have developed a mobile journalist workstation, which straps on to a reporter's back and enables him or her to return from a news event with multiple types of content.

We, as educators, are always working out the best way for our students to learn. Project based learning involves students undertaking practical activities and we, like many other institutions, encourage project based learning. My colleague, broadcast lecturer Liz Tynan, has pointed out the success in project learning when discussing broadcast journalism students producing stories for the community radio station based here on our campus. In examining project-based learning in the context of broadcast teaching, Liz has adapted the more generic ideas of Canadian psychology academic Endel Tulving. Episodic memory is said to be specific, biographical, time related, event related and date related. It is tied to a particular learning episode or experience while semantic learning is general knowledge not tied to a particular experience. Episodic memory also tends to be more emotional because it involves something that happened to the person, while semantic tends to be more intellectual and is to do with learning the facts.

I wanted to tie in a particular learning episode to introduce new skills in a meaningful way.

In Winter School, this year, I coordinated the delivery of a unit called Convergent Journalism. 'Convergent journalists', as I mentioned, need skills such as nonlinear editing, how to use digital cameras and mindisc recorders and how to write for the web to deliver the same story across multiple mediums: audio, video and text. Our students at the University of Tasmania, like many other institutions, have a mix of practical and theoretical based learning. In this unit, the concept was more abstract. For a start, there were few examples to illustrate what was required. The Poynter Institute seems to be leading the way in the US and I was pleased, albeit after the event, to view their website for examples.

In setting up our course, I found there were not enough educators around who could boast such comprehensive skills in all three mediums. Usually, journalism educators, who have practical experience, have strengths in either television, radio or print. In delivering convergent journalism, it's vital that students should learn the strengths of each medium for telling a story.

As the major assignment for the Convergent students, I seized the opportunity for the students to produce a short profile on Tasmanian artists. The final product was to be produced on video, audio and text for possible placement on the ABC online website.

What have I learned as an educator? It was by far the most difficult and challenging course I have ever offered. However, I also believe if you are to develop a teaching practice that embraces risk-taking, you need to experiment in order to push subject boundaries. One student, who flew from Melbourne to enrol in this subject, returned to tutor in journalism at an institution in the mainland of Australia telling me there was nothing like that on the mainland.

I have changed the way it's being taught when it's offered again this summer following constructive feedback from the students. It is important to be able to source the right people to deliver the course. I have engaged one person to deliver the course to ensure continuity. As most of the students were learning the digital technology for the first time, it is vital to have someone during the post production period when they are preparing their major assignments. We've fixed the problems we had with storage drive space. As I mentioned, it's also important to produce strength across all mediums. I have asked a sound engineer to deliver the audio skills. I have devoted two days in the new syllabus to sound.

We showed the clips at an end of semester function. In spite of the struggle, there were positive outcomes. Straight after the course, the students continued to put into practice what they had learned, by producing profiles on scientists for a website.

The students told me they were inspired by the wisdom from Mark Davis from SBS Dateline who was able to show them how he dived into the bush in East Timor, laptop and camera in hand, who edited his own stories and as a one-man band, was able to turn over a wealth of material.

As my friend Eric Campbell, from ABC's Foreign Correspondent, said cynically when I told him I was offering 'convergent journalism': "Budget cutback journalism". He may be right, but if news is a commodity and it's a cheaper way of getting it across, then surely that alone will guarantee convergent journalism is here to stay. Convergent needn't dilute the "basics" of good writing, reporting, and ethics and as long as we continue to ensure our graduates remember the role of the media as the fourth estate, it is my view, that we cannot resist this change.

Professor Gordon, conceded in his new book, this trend won't happen overnight, but he said: "No longer can journalists assume that just because they work in one medium (say, a print newspaper), they don't need to worry about how their story should be presented in another (on television or the Web). No longer can journalism school faculty assume that they can turn out graduates who understand only one set of communications tools.... the journalists who best understand the unique capabilities of multiple media will be the ones who are most successful, drive the greatest innovations and become the leaders of tomorrow."

As educators, we need to take note.

Source: Tulving Endel, "What is Episodic Memory and Why is it Unique?", Bauer Colloquium Series, 1999

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NewsPlex, proposed by a new group of Australian journalism educators. Australian Convergent Journalism Special Interest Group