

Symposium
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Journalistic story-telling with online multimedia
Challenges, quality criteria, training

"One doesn't discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time", says a frequently quoted aphorism by the French author André Gide. It takes the courage to do this in journalistic training. For the chances of a new medium cannot be discovered without consenting to lose sight of forms of presentation and one or the other editing practice characteristic of the old media. This may also mean that training should move away from the present practices in online journalism, as in the start-up stage of a new medium journalists very frequently copy and imitate the routine methods of the conventional media under the pressure of day to day production. The development of a more innovative Internet journalism is still hesitant. Especially during training it should therefore focus on creative playing and testing; new forms and formats should be considered and improved. To lose sight of the old coasts does not mean to ban them completely from one's mind. On the journey to the new continent Internet we carry with us the basic tools of journalism. The criteria of this professional journalism represent the navigation instruments. On this basis, professional training in Internet journalism must answer two questions: what is new about the new medium Internet? What needs to be discovered – that is discussed, reflected upon and trained – in addition to this basis? Exercises and seminars pursue one aim: Internet training essentially means learning to "think the new medium".

In the following I would like to present some ideas as to how this aim might be pursued. These ideas were developed in the course of various workshops and seminars that were part of journalistic professional and further training: More than 300 journalists have participated in this training courses in Germany, Switzerland and Singapore for the last two years. A text book on applied Internet journalism has been developed on the basis of these seminars of which a second edition has meanwhile been published.

Online story-telling: challenges and quality criteria

"The white rabbit put on his glasses. 'Where should I begin, Your Majesty?', it asked. 'Begin at the beginning,' said the king earnestly, 'and continue to read until you reach the end, then stop.'" What Lewis Carroll relates in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" is repeatedly recommended as the foundation for all forms of journalistic reporting. Linear progression constitutes the core of journalism in the conventional media: an article should be written in such a way that the text right away captures the attention of the reader and holds it to the end. The reader should absorb a story from start to finish in a single go – without deviations sideways, backwards or forwards.

The situation is different in web journalism: for extensive theme-related packages, stories are broken down into brief, stand-alone units connected by so-called links. Author and user can take different ways through a hypertext. But, of course, also in the web the aim is to capture the reader's attention from the start and induce him or her to stick with the story to the end – though the white rabbit may choose a different reading route than the king, were he to read for himself.

The non-linear hypertext principle opens up new communication opportunities: the reader can be offered selective, individual access to a great deal more information than with linear media. He or she can decide, by repeated mouse clicks, just how far to go into a theme-related information package. For this reason, hypertext researchers talk in terms of a new form of organising knowledge in a free and associative way. They compare the hypertext principle with the natural working method of the human brain.

Just as every medium has its own particular style for telling a story, it is necessary to find a special style for the web. The challenges are to find new forms of journalistic reporting with hypertext and multimedia. We cannot simply collect, break down and re-assemble vast volumes of information, network them somehow and put them all on an Internet server – and leave the user to seek it all out. But how is it possible to facilitate orientation in hypertexts, while at the same time producing and maintaining tension? The following six quality criteria can be named for writing extensive multimedia web specials:

(1) Information design – a basic principle for writing for the web is that the text creator must think "graphically" and bear in mind the processing – the information design – already at the time of carrying out research and writing the text. The actual writing is divided into a content level (the actual body of text) and the operational level, where the question arises of apportioning the material between the requirements of user guidance and "linking" the individual text parts.

(2) Apportioning and storyboarding – a longer information unit can be offered either as one long page involving scrolling down through several screen pages, or divided into several individual pages connected via links. Both approaches have advantages and drawbacks. Constant scrolling back and forth in a long page quickly results in confusion. If the information on offer includes a great many details, then it is preferable to create several smaller modules that can be downloaded at will -and this only by the users who are genuinely interested in the corresponding part of the topic. However, if a text is divided into too many, too small units, this also will result in confusion and the reader wanting to read everything may experience navigation problems.

What is the best way to divide a topic into individual aspects? Usually the content of a topic, the function and objective of an article, will produce a certain information structure, in which case the form of presentation is of major importance.

A news item on the web is also written in accordance with the reversed pyramid principle, i.e. the most important and topical aspects lead. But a wide range of background information can be offered on other, linked pages: the origins of the news item, historical reviews, brief biographies of the persons involved, the bulletin in the context of different developments, parallel occurrences, etc. Therefore, it is possible to organise the apportionment of the news item into topical and people-related aspects: the current story on one page, story origins, people involved, parallel cases on other pages – with each aspect on its own page.

It is somewhat more difficult to process a feature article for the web. The people who are involved, or whom the story concerns, can tell their stories on separate pages – from different viewpoints – with actions, subjective impressions or backgrounds published on other pages. Accordingly, the viewpoint or action aspects can be taken as a basis for breaking-down a feature article.

The rule applies for all forms of presentation: the individual text parts should not fall apart like a jigsaw puzzle. It must be clear and logical why a text unit was singled out and given its own page. A storyboard can be of assistance in the planning of a modular web package: a systematic layout of the structure with boxes for the individual pages and arrows for the links. A clear and transparent site structure is especially important: the constant freedom on the part of the reader to decide which links to use or which path to take through the texts can lead to frustration in cases where labyrinths or diversions, cul-de-sacs or circular story-relating paths prevent fast information communication or even cause chaotic navigation. A further orientation problem

is that always only a small part of the total information can be shown on the display screen. A hypertext cannot be held in the hand like a newspaper or magazine.

(3) Navigation and user guidance – something that is undoubtedly more difficult for the web than for a print story is to ensure harmony throughout an extensive package: despite any breaking-down of the story, one unit, one story must be recognisable. As a means of achieving this, it is recommended that the author should start by writing a core sentence. Each text part must refer to the core sentence and answer the question: "Why do you tell me this at this point?"

That also means that the individual modules must be linked by their own navigation system for the web package. This navigation system fulfils two functions: a brief glance should suffice to give the user a fast overview on how the package is organised and in which part of the text he or she is currently reading. And one click on the navigation points brings the reader to a different page, possibly even switching the narrative path.

In cases where more than one narrative path is possible, it is essential that the connections between all possible links between units are carefully considered: each text unit must be easy to understand, no matter where the reader is coming from.

(4) Formulate navigation points – similar to sub-headings in a print feature, navigation points in the hypertext support reader orientation through the story as a whole: underlined colour words, buttons, graphics including a link. Navigation points also are referred to as "hot words" or "hot spots". They form the attachment points for an entire network of threads and must guide the reader through the story as well as offer orientation assistance – thus ensuring the reader gets what he or she is looking for. Navigation points must be self-explanatory. It should be clear at first glance where the link will lead. In addition, a hot spot should produce tension, allude to something new, important or scurrilous – and then, naturally, live up to its promise. Undoubtedly the poorest text for a navigation point is "please click here".

(5) Advanced links – external links can offer more source transparency as well as an information depth that cannot be achieved by conventional media. They lead outside the original presentation and refer to sources or further information from other suppliers.

But should a journalist link his article with other sources whose content he has not checked, or may not be able to check? Can journalists guarantee the accuracy of other web sites to which they refer in their articles? At least one piece of advice can be of assistance in the case of controversial external links: as precise information as possible

should be given in relation to each external link – in particular the author and context of every resource. If it is a problem to accommodate this information in the body text, then a type of "entry hall" can help into which the users are guided before leaving the presentation: the reader can be informed on a special page as to where the link leads and he or she be given the possibility to stay in the original presentation after all.

(6) Audio and video. How can multimedia elements be integrated into online texts? Just as text does not push to the fore in TV features but instead allows the fascination of the images to take effect, text in the multimedia package must act in accordance with the "judo principle", i.e. put the strength of the other elements to use. Although text plays a much more important part in the online medium than in television, multimedia techniques combine the characters and opportunities of the individual media. They avail of the strengths of the individual media to present a topic and avoid the weaknesses that every medium has. For example, for the first time the web offers the possibility to present a combination of text and audio elements: a text and photo feature can be complemented by "atmospheric" audio elements recorded on-site that are heard when reading. The original voices of the people involved that can additionally be retrieved ensures the authenticity and liveliness of a story.

If video sequences are to be integrated it is necessary to rethink. Short video sequences should concentrate on essentials: boring short cuts that are necessary in television features to provide space for text – politicians arriving in limousines, party flags blowing in the wind, journalists taking notes in press conferences – these pictures have no place in the Internet. Text is presented as text, not spoken out of the "off" by a speaker. The integration of videos thus demonstrates clearly what it means to lose an old medium out of sight but not out of mind.

Competencies and training

Two relevant journalistic competences can be deduced from these challenges and quality criteria:

- Online journalists must have abilities in all forms of journalistic reporting, news gathering and writing. They must be able to research and write news items, reports, comments and features, and they must be capable of producing radio and television features - both technically and content-wise.
- They need knowledge of and a feeling for the specific construction of the web.

This second point must be acquired in addition to the conventional journalists' training if journalists or communication officers are to be made fit for the web. I train this in courses producing theme packages for the web. Participants are divided into teams, each team treats one overall topic. The editors have to think graphically and in terms of multimedia right from the beginning of the production process and have to keep the Internet presentation in mind when researching and writing. Video images and sound effects must be recorded. The next step is to portion the information into screen pages and to plan the package with a multimedia storyboard. Finally, the design of the different modules and the development of a navigation system for the respective package is of great importance. Special attention must be paid to the formulation of navigation points that can be clicked on, and that contain links to other parts of the package. By working on the conception, storyboard and navigation each team can develop a feeling for the construction of the new medium. Our Internet magazine subsequently consists of various theme packages that must be integrated into a single unit, under a common navigation system.

The Production of theme packages does not belong to the methods that dominate present day Internet journalism in Germany. Most online magazines produced by newspapers, magazines or broadcasting companies continue to offer timid and less innovative journalism: journalists have neither the time nor the interest to consider and test new approaches, experience failure and subsequently introduce improvements. Or they are uncertain in their opinion as to what will prevail in the Internet, and therefore prefer to have recourse to what has proven its value in the print medium. The predominant approach in Internet journalism is often to exactly copy conventional media and recycle existing contents.

In most cases, the newsrooms tend to work with brief news items and refrain from offering extensive theme-related pages including background information that could stay longer on the web and provide readers with a useful service over periods of weeks. The online newspapers resemble news channels – there is an absence of other forms, such as the feature article, theme-related page, background feature or weekly supplement for the newspaper.

Of course, these more complex and higher-quality presentations are used by a smaller audience than the (brief) news items. But there will be a greater demand for these also in the Internet, as evidenced by examples not only from the United States but also by user studies in Germany which indicate that the Internet is increasingly becoming a universal daily medium and that there is a trend towards its developing from an information to an infotainment medium. The lines between information and entertain-

ment become less distinct: information presented in an entertaining and exciting way are in increasing demand - certainly a different situation than up to two to three years ago, when most online users dialled-into the web almost exclusively for the soberly presented and brief information it offered. Today, users want to have fun looking up information and set out on a voyage of discovery with the computer mouse.

Teaching to "think the new medium"

In short, specific exercises in applied Internet journalism, which consist in the production of multimedia web packages offer a concrete possibility to pursue our goal - "learning to think the new medium". They are composed of three steps:

- Getting to know the construction of the new medium - from writing and editing over sight conception to navigation;
- Innovative and playful testing of new forms of presentation, that have so far been little used in practice;
- Trying out and practicing multimedia narration.

Examples

By way of example I would like to show you a multimedia feature, taken from the online offer of the "Chicago Tribune", a German multimedia web package that was produced in my seminar at the Catholic University of Eichstätt last semester and a web special taken from the Internet edition of the "Philadelphia Inquirer".

- **Chicago Tribune: Women of the world**

<http://chicagotribune.com/news/metro/chicago/article/0,2669,ART-26224,00.html>

The "Chicago Tribune" successfully combines text video and audio as for example in the story about young women living on the street. In addition to pictures showing the four portrayed women, the surroundings in which they live and short texts about them, the women talk about their lives in audio takes. This makes the story much more authentic and real than a newspaper report using only text and pictures.

- **ei: a student's web package**

<http://www.ku-eichstaett.de/ei/bauch>

Similarly students in my seminar at the Catholic University of Eichstätt have tried to combine text, pictures, audio and video. The online magazine "ei" contains three pack-

ages. One tells the story of a ventriloquist (who is, by the way, world champion in ventriloquism and lives in Eichstätt). It starts with a short video clip. Then the user can chose between different topics according to his interests. "Pat´s Life", for example, leads you to the project "The colourful arch". On this page you can listen to one of the ventriloquist`s songs. On another page there is an audio-take of him talking about the technique of ventriloquism. The page "Puppet Gallery" presents the ventriloquist`s favourite puppets.

- **Philadelphia Inquirer: Medical Mistakes**

<http://health.philly.com/specials/mistakes/krt.asp>

The "Philadelphia Inquirer" presents the subject "medical mistakes" by means of several texts which are difficult to read on screen because of their extreme length. How to tell a story much more appropriately to online multimedia is shown in the same package: In a special area a large amount of text is broken down into brief units guided through links and a pull-down-menu. Especially the six case studies presented in this special are in an exemplary manner written and designed.

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