Syracuse University

SURFACE

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CitrusTV Website Redesign Project

Alyssa Elias

Reflective Essay

During the summer of 2009, I had my first internship at WBZ-TV in Boston, the CBS owned and operated television station. A professor had suggested an internship as a web producing intern. I knew, as a sophomore in college, that I did not want to work as a web producer. However, the professor told me that I would gain a skillset that would make me an asset during my early career. I left WBZ at the end of the summer with not only a new skillset, but also a whole new perspective on the importance of digital platforms in traditional newsrooms.

I returned to campus with the role of producer at CitrusTV News. CitrusTV is the oldest and largest student-run television station in the country. It airs on the Orange Television Network, which is available to students who live in campus housing. Yet, with all of the awards and visibility on the Syracuse University campus, The website did not look like a site belonging to a professional television station (see appendix #1). The students who do not live on campus, making up a large number of the student body, are unable to view the

content on television and must rely on the website for

campus news and local stories. Student reporters were

handing in stories for television, but not providing digital-

friendly content that could inform those who are unable to

watch the Orange Television Network. People who live

off campus therefore found few features when they

visited CitrusTV.net.

This motivated me to find a way to change the

website in order to mirror that of a professional news

station. My initial goal was to have my Honors Capstone

partner, Tim Daigle, create a content management

system (CMS) from scratch. I would then train students to

use the CMS. This plan fell victim to several challenges,

including two changes in CitrusTV's executive staffing.

The end result, however, is a viable prototype for the

station to consider when the staff is ready to revamp the

website.

Why Digital Content?

First came radio and then came television. Now,

digital platforms are the newest frontier for journalists.

According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism, on

a typical day, 61% of Americans get their news online

and the majority of them are under 50[i]. This is no surprise

because people consumed with work and family commitments and younger audiences, such as college students, may not have the time to sit down and watch full local or national news broadcasts. It is, therefore, a matter of convenience to turn to an online source of news. In fact, 46% of online users above the age of 18 are getting their news from television station or network websites[ii].

The numbers for local television news viewers are dropping at an accelerated rate, on the other hand. Viewership was down between 5% to 8% each month during 2008 and 2009[iii]. While the largest ad revenue is still derived from television broadcasts, many people are turning to the web for their news instead.

While one may think automatically of a person sitting at his or computer during a lunch break, the digital offerings have expanded to include mobile devices. "…Mobile technology is emerging as a powerful means for publishing multimedia to mobile audiences.[iv]" Stories are not only seen on special "mobile view" websites, but now, they can be accessed through news stations' iPhone, iPad and Android applications. A station's digital presence is even more important, as a result.

For breaking news, digital content is king. When a story breaks, not everyone has his or her television turned on, especially if it happens in the middle of the day. What is more likely to happen is an e-mail alert, tweet or Facebook status update from the station's page will instantly alert the audience. It is highly unlikely that the audience then would reach for a remote to turn on the television. Instead they are more likely to click the link to the station's website and access the information instantly. The internet is fast and stories can be updated as the information flows into the station.

Convergence

In today's newsroom, one of the key topics is "convergence." In the context of journalism, this can mean "…the same reporter preparing information for TV, radio, print and the web[v]." In a typical television newsroom, reporters are required to write different versions of their television stories to post on the website. Other staff members, including producers, news directors and assignment editors may also contribute material. In larger cities, such as Boston and New York, web producing staffs maintain the website, posting stories and

tweaking reporter's broadcast-style scripts to web-style writing. A study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism finds that 67% of news sites rely on reporting from traditional media outlets[vi]. While sites such as the Huffington Post are news aggregators, many people are still looking to mainstream media that produce their own original content, such as newspaper and television websites. When one wants to know what is going on in his or her city, the most reliable resources are typically the local paper and the local TV news.

The average reporter's packaged broadcast story is about 1 minute, 30 seconds. In this brief time, the reporter must tell the story using only the most important details. The web script is different from the television script. The web adds more information and context to the story. The video is included with the text, sometimes, along with stills for a detailed, multimedia experience. According to an RTDNA and Hofstra survey, 90% of news station websites consist of text, stills and videos[vii].

CitrusTV.net

The website encompasses the entire station's programming — news, sports and entertainment. While

this is atypical of most news sites, for CitrusTV's student reporters, it is a way to display work across several areas of interest. The site is easy to navigate with a uniform structure. The use of the color orange, as a highlight to the predominantly grey and white design, is appropriate and makes the site more visually appealing. The clips on the side of the screen include web extras and previews of upcoming events. They are easily accessible.

However, there are several aspects to the news portion of the site that are problematic (see appendix #2). The first and most concerning issue is that there are full shows available for viewing, rather than individual stories. Across the 200 most popular news websites, the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that users spend an average of just 3 minutes and 6 seconds on each site[viii]. For CitrusTV.net, users spend even less -- just over two minutes on the site (see appendix #3). This means that most people are not going to watch a 30 minute news show. More than 90% of the video watched on local news sites consists of news stories, while only 30% of video watched is a recorded or live newscast[ix].

Furthermore, there are no text stories to be found. The site has a blog, which is operated by executive staff

and often serves the purpose of station promotion. For journalism purposes, the blog is neither updated often nor has stories. In order for a blog to reach audiences, it must have both[x]. For the purposes of this project, the blog will be considered a public relations tool, rather than a way for student journalists to post their stories. Therefore, text stories, along with video clips are a necessity on the news department's page.

The last item of note is that CitrusTV has a strong commitment to Facebook and Twitter. Followers and fans are reminded to tune in to live, streaming broadcasts, which is effective. But the other potential value to social media -- marketing CitrusTV.net -- is lost because the website lacks timely or valuable content. Whether it is breaking news or a reporter's story about an event on campus, the reason people turn to media outlets is to find out information. While the station's use of social media is commendable, it can improve through better content and through highlighting its Twitter stream and Facebook badge on its website. CitrusTV can use techniques similar to professional stations to push viewers to its website, highlighted later in this essay.

The Process

The project underwent three distinct phases (See appendix #4). The first lasted for a year and is deemed, the "planning stage." The second is the "metamorphosis stage" and it lasted from December 2010 through March 2011. Throughout this time, the site and the goal of the project changed from theoretical to concrete. The third and final stage, during the month of April 2011, included the bulk of the work on the actual prototype.

Phase One: The Planning Stage

I pitched the idea of a new content management system to CitrusTV's News Director during September 2009. He agreed that the site was not up to par with those of other news organizations. We discussed the importance of students turning to CitrusTV as a source for campus news, much like people do for the Daily Orange.

Once I was paired up with Tim Daigle through the Honors Program, we met to discuss the possibility of creating a content management system. Tim is a dual major in the iSchool. He did some research throughout fall 2009, in addition to gaining access to some parts of

the website's server. CitrusTV management was hesitant to give us any access whatsoever because Tim was not a station member. Eventually, I convinced them it was necessary in order to proceed.

The large gap in our progress occurred during my time abroad during the spring semester 2010. Because I was no longer an active member of CitrusTV, I was unable to observe practices within the newsroom after a change in management. Upon my return, it was clear that this new management was unreceptive to my plans for the website. After several requests for a meeting were ignored, I sent a document highlighting the importance of the project to the incoming General Manager (see Appendix #5). I modified my pitch to include a new possibility for including web producers in the newsroom: digital training for freshmen and sophomores. CitrusTV requires a rigorous training process for new members. They must shadow older students, as well as work on a practice show. A web department could integrate new members into the newsroom in a way where they would not just observe, but would be able to participate.

I then had a meeting with the incoming General Manager Ben Slutzky, and he agreed he would consider

looking at the site, but was not obligated to implement it or train people how to use it. While his response was unexpected, it was a barrier we were able to overcome. Tim and I decided we'd make the site as a prototype and then present it to the management staff at the end of second semester.

Fulfilling my vision of having a workflow for a web team, I then wrote a training manual (see appendix #6). I included formatting, such as which fonts to use, and also a style guide for writing for the web. The manual is written in a conversational and easy-to-read manner. It is geared toward freshmen who are training to move up through being a part of the web staff, as they develop their producer and reporter skills. It comes with an introduction, explaining the benefits of working as a web producer. It then explains the role of the web producer and suggests how the department should be structured. This was a critical element of the manual, even before Tim and I decided on a prototype. It suggests how a web department could integrate specifically into the CitrusTV newsroom.

Phase Two: Metamorphosis

Once Tim and I accepted that implementation was not a priority, he decided to create a free Wordpress site to start building the content management system. He also bought a video upgrade through Wordpress, which would allow staffers to upload video directly from their computers, rather than embedding clips from YouTube. It looks more professional because there are no advertisements, related videos or YouTube branding embedded with the clips.

Once the video upgrade was tested, I changed the layout to mimic the current CitrusTV.net site. The background is gray, the borders are orange and the header is the CitrusTV logo.

I then added the most important part of the site: content. I used one of my own stories as an example of how a long-form web story could look. I included the headline, subheads and small paragraphs. I also included the picture I took on my BlackBerry while out on the story. This provides a realistic expectation of what a reporter could do with a mobile device. I uploaded the package that aired for my class' newscast last semester directly from my computer, using the video hosting tool. While it took more than an hour to upload and process, it

had a cleaner look than any videos embedded from YouTube.

For an example of a short-form story, I added a piece from CitrusTV's YouTube site. It was an update on Governor Andrew Cuomo's visit to Syracuse University this semester. There was a question-and-answer session between the anchor and the reporter, so a short paragraph was a more appropriate approach. The person reading the story would have to click on the video in order to find out more.

One of the most common ways for a broadcast station to drive traffic to the website is to tease exclusive content on the web. CitrusTV sports provides more web exclusives than any other department in the station. An exclusive interview with the Marquette men's basketball Head Coach Mike Hopkins after his team beat Syracuse in the NCAA Tournament is a great exclusive to tease and include on the prototype website. I included a sentence beneath the video to summarize the background. The audience would already know what they are watching by the headline: *CitrusTV Exclusive: Post-Game Interview With Marquette Coach Mike Hopkins.* The word "exclusive" is critical to include in the headline.

It shows the station seeks unique content and committed to rewarding its viewers with it.

I wanted to incorporate social media into the homepage of the site. I made a test Twitter account, *@citrustvthesis*, to serve as an example. I started to tweet updates on how the site was progressing and continued as the project develops. The station already has a Facebook fan page. I was unable to gain access to the information in order to post it onto the prototype website. The Facebook fan page is critical for breaking news. Many stations, including WSYR in Syracuse and WMTW in Portland, Maine break news on their Facebook first in order to reach the most people. The Facebook page then includes a link back to the website, in order to increase traffic.

Phase Three: The Final Stage

These final weeks included the tweaking of the layouts and adding features that complete the site (see appendix #7). The top navigation menu is similar to the original site. I made a custom menu, which allows the "news" and "sports" sections to link to the archives in both categories. The "entertainment," "about us," and "executive staff" pages are all copied from the original

site for demonstration purposes. The "station blog" button

is a link to the original station blog. For the "contact us"

section, I created a custom form using Wordpress so that

theoretically, users could send an email through the site -

- a feature on many professional stations' sites.

I continued to add stories in order to expand the

categories used on the site. I posted clips from "Noticias

en Español," the Spanish-language broadcast and "Juice

and Java," which is a talk show. I also commented on

several of the stories to show the functionality for users of

the site. Commenting helps make the site more

interactive, offering a way to engage users as they

browse the site. In addition, I added an "addthis" button

to the side menu that allows people who visit the site to

share it on Twitter, Facebook or bookmark it through

another external site. Addthis didn't always work when

using Safari and Google Chrome browsers. However,

with Firefox, it worked as expected.

Once the prototype was more developed, I

recorded screencasts that serve as how-to videos for

CitrusTV staffers updating the site. I used the free

program Jing, along with my built-in microphone to record

the screencasts. I added a "For Staff Only" page onto the

top navigation menu as a home on the site for CitrusTV members to access the screencasts and tutorials.

The first screencast's purpose is to familiarize staffers with the layout of the site. They are able to learn about Twitter's incorporation and what happens when they click on each category in the top navigation menu.

The second screencast teaches users how to properly format each story, in order to keep each story uniform. It also includes information on writing a headline.

The third screencast further details search engine optimization, techniques that potentially improve Google, Bing and Yahoo! rankings. The third screencast also teaches staffers how to embed pictures and links. While these items may seem like an afterthought, they may be the most important. "The link has proved to be more than an add-on feature to journalism. It is a powerful form of content that builds readership and brings readers back."[xi]

The final screencast is a lesson on the types of stories that a reporter can write after a day in the field. It is realistic in that it details how a reporter on a strict deadline can still write a web story. It also shows reporters how to drive traffic to the site through social media. Spreading the links to stories is crucial for those

who use social media. "More than 99% of stories linked in to blogs came from legacy outlets such as newspapers and broadcast networks."[xii] Therefore, people are still relying on traditional outlets as a resource for news and facts. If CitrusTV has compelling content on its website that is being promoted through social media, there is more potential for it to be linked to on blogs.

Challenges and Potential Solutions

There were several obstacles that we encountered throughout building the prototype website, the first of which was the disconnect between Tim and me. As a student journalist, I work under intense deadlines where I have seven hours to put together a story to air on television and to appear on the web. I am used to setting deadlines and then meeting them. I expected Tim to do the same. I tried to set deadlines for him to finish certain aspects of the content management system, without understanding the full scope of the work that was required. He was unable to complete these on our project timeline, which caused me to become frustrated at times.

The miscommunication between journalists and programmers is not a new phenomenon[xiii]. Even the St.

Petersburg Times has noted similar problems. ""Our newsroom was complaining about their own Web development in terms of delivering stuff on time and features that were asked for…It's not because they're not good at what they do. It's because of organization and project management.'"[xiv]

This project was an experiment for both Tim and me. Therefore, I can only make recommendations for the future, the first of which is to establish times and mechanisms for regular communication. A weekly email to give updates on the site's progress would have been helpful for us both to gauge how far along each of our respective timelines for the project was. An up-front, honest conversation about what is possible and what is unrealistic on the development end is also important. Because our project shifted from being a fully functioning site to a prototype a couple of months before it was due, it was far too late to develop some original proposals. Our current prototype could have included more upgrades with more time, including a more professional looking layout.

Three different changes in CitrusTV management left Tim and me in limbo until January 2011. Throughout

each change, we encountered different attitudes toward our project. One general manager refused to answer any emails, while the current general manager responded to our requests, but was firm that he would not implement our site.

The current News Director attended a meeting in which we spent time trying to figure out how adding digital content to a reporter's list of duties would work. He was open to the idea of taking a reporter's story and reformatting it to a web-style, but he seemed reluctant about my role as an executive producer of digital content.

In a newsroom, there are many interactions and even personality conflicts on a daily basis. This particular argument with the News Director was a lesson in how to manage them. The News Director may be what former Newhouse Professor Dow Smith calls "the Know-it-all"[xv]. I was forced to employ the techniques Smith suggests in order to bring him around to my point of view: "Don't just hit him with a new idea. Take time to set up the idea. Give him some background, reasons and time to digest the concept.[xvi]" I was therefore forced to compromise. If the prototype was accepted, stories would be a few sentences long, instead of the paragraphs I initially

envisioned. There would be a separate web producer, instead of reporters uploading their own content.

There are not many clear-cut solutions that come to mind when dealing with three different changes in management throughout the time of the project. A debriefing at the start of each management change would have been effective. However, I was studying abroad in London during the transition that presented the largest challenge. In retrospect, I should have engaged them in a Skype conversation if I were unable to be on campus. Scheduling monthly meetings would also have prevented some of the later realizations that we came to about the state of the prototype.

Conclusions

Regardless of whether or not CitrusTV adopts the prototype website, the organization has room for improvement in its social media campaigns. CitrusTV's social media engagement can be analyzed through its Klout score. Klout.com allows any organization or individual with a Twitter handle to measure their social media presence across the web. It ranges from 0-100, with a score of 100 denoting the most influential

individual or organization on the internet. "The Klout score is highly correlated to clicks, comments and retweets."[xvii] With a Klout score of 33[xviii], CitrusTV has room for improvement. The local television station, WSYR, has a score of 53, and the Daily Orange has a score of 49.[xix] By comparison, CitrusTV has a smaller social media presence. Its score for amplification is low with only three retweets on average per day. The content that is being retweeted is apparently not seen as worthwhile for sharing with friends and followers. With a more robust website, CitrusTV would be able to tweet individual story and video clips out to people, so that they have a more consistent and potentially engaging avenue to attract website viewers. The station could also use Twitter and its social media outlets to break news. Many people, including myself, retweet breaking news. This would improve the station's reputation as a go-to for a Syracuse University news source.

In a less sophisticated promotion, the station could also follow more traditional routes, such as putting up signs throughout campus or chalking the sidewalk on the Quad with the station's website. People may be more apt to take a look at the site with more visibility on campus.

Our prototype could be easily integrated and implemented within the next several semesters. It would fit into the management structure easily, especially with a Web Manager already on staff. The content on the website, however, does have to be updated regularly, easy to access and more engaging, as suggested by current trends in reports, such as the State of the News Media. In order to serve its function as a place to learn about television news outside of class, CitrusTV will have to adapt to current practices at professional news stations. Through expanding its digital content, it will become a better training ground and an even better respected resource on the Syracuse University campus.

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Footnotes

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