



New journalism is not just about glitzy story-telling

*A tipsheet by David Poulson, Associate Director
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New story forms are the big buzz in journalism. Seconds after you suggest an idea, chances are an editor demands that you grab a quick video interview for the Web.

Maybe your art department inserts information that pops up on a graphic at the touch of a mouse. Perhaps you're narrating slideshows.

Maybe you've produced a podcast or – heavens – are telling stories on a blog.

All that is very cool and exciting and something we should be doing as we figure out journalism nowadays. But lost in all the story-telling glitz are the new tools for the mundane aspects of our job.

You know – finding, gathering and organizing all that information so that you have the building blocks of a story, the stuff you need regardless of how you choose to tell it.

In a very fundamental way our job remains unchanged. Journalists still sift through overwhelming, suspect, confusing and seemingly unrelated bits of information to interpret the world for others. It's just that nowadays powerful tools are needed to sort through an information explosion.

You don't have to use them. But chances of finding a good story are better if you do. Here are four Web tools that may keep you from drowning in data:

Tags – If you're bookmarking Web sites, you're already tagging. But if you think bookmarking with your browser is helpful, try a social bookmarking site. Visit <http://del.icio.us/> and sign up for a free account. With Del.icio.us you can sort into a virtual bin (or tag) anything you come across on the Web. It might be of long term interest or fodder for a breaking story. Maybe it's about a lake integral to your beat. Every government report, news story or academic study relevant to that lake can be tagged with its name. Then your source documents are at your fingertips when you sit down to write. Here's how tags are superior to simple bookmarks:

- You can quickly tag the same document several ways. A report on habitat loss could be tagged by geography, cause or consequence. That same report can show up under separate tags for Lake Ojibway, climate change, water pollution or others.

- You can see what other people tag. Follow what a trusted source is tagging and you may find a story. Got a favorite reporter who is always ahead of the curve? Check out what he or she tags and maybe you can borrow a story idea or source.
- Unlike bookmarks, you can access your tags from any computer.

RSS feeds – SEJ member and self-described media consultant/info-provocateur Amy Gahrn introduced me to feeds at the 2003 SEJ national conference in New Orleans. I grabbed hold of the concept as a useful way of publishing one of my projects. Content producers find feeds handy for bypassing congested e-mail boxes to reach subscribers directly.

But nowadays people use feeds to surf efficiently. Instead of checking Web sites for new content, have Web sites tell you when they have something new.

Check out Google's free feed reader. Just click on the reader link after you create or sign onto your account at google.com. The directions are straight forward, and Amy has an excellent video tutorial at <http://www.capturetheconversation.com/internet-marketing-training/google-reader/>

Once you have a reader set up, you can quickly organize content and track it for updates. You're no longer searching for new information. New information finds you. One caveat: Work your feeds a couple of weeks. It's a bit of an adjustment. But give it a fair trial and you're unlikely to return to blind surfing.

I'm tempted to say that feeds drastically reduce my online time. Instead, I think that I surf just as long, perhaps longer. But I see much, much more of the Web that interests me.

Social Media – I don't practice what I'm about to preach. Maybe I'm anti-social. Maybe I'm too busy reading all those feeds. But if I was reporting again, I'd reconsider. Here's why:

One of my students wrote about a warm winter forecasted for our region. Typically you might approach such a story by interviewing weather experts and then conducting a dozen person-on-the-street interviews in hopes of capturing three useable quotes.

But this student went to Facebook and quickly limited potential sources to those attending our university. Then she checked for students listing winter sports as a favorite pastime. That gave her local sources most likely to gripe about a mild winter. All that was left was to track them down, assess their credibility and arrange quick interviews.

Find more professional sources at linkedin.com. Here you can search for experts, post questions, sort through an archive of answers for story ideas. Post a profile that describes your reporting needs. Now sources can find you with stories and ideas.

Can you trust sources found this way? Hey, you're the reporter. You don't get off the hook that easily. You need to investigate and assess credibility. But at least you have something to evaluate. That's why you're paid the big bucks.

Twitter – It took me a while to warm to the utility of a service that limits posts to 140 characters and tells a network of contacts what you're up to at any given moment. The first thing

I posted in response to “What are you doing now?” was “Trying to figure out why Twitter is remotely useful.”

I’ve read suggestions that journalists should create a Twitter “posse” of expert sources. The idea is to gain instant feedback on story angles or questions to ask while you’re working a story. That may be particularly handy because you can access Twitter with a cell phone from a crime scene or breaking news event.

Still, I was cynical about anyone taking the time to do that while chasing a story. But a former student in my computer-assisted reporting class who found a job in online news convinced me that there may be something here for journalists. Shawn Smith is a senior content producer for MLive.com, the online arm of Booth Newspapers, a chain of eight daily newspapers in Michigan. He also blogs about new media applications for journalism at www.newmediabytes.com.

Shawn has about 120 followers on Twitter, all self-identified as interested in the same stuff that he is. During the primaries he read that Barak Obama followed 12,000 people on Twitter and that Hillary Clinton followed zero. He figured comparing the campaigns’ social media strategy might make a good story. So he posted the idea on his Twitter account. Several of his Twitter connections responded with pointers to helpful research and news stories.

“What’s really helped me is creating a bigger network,” Shawn said. “When I post things, people respond because they are interested in what I’m interested in. It goes into their Twitter feed, and they say, ‘I may have an answer to that.’”

People can respond in ways that lead you to thinking differently about an issue, he said.

Those are just four tools for helping you navigate the drink-from-a-firehose-information-madhouse reporters face today. There are certainly more. Send your favorites to Poulson@msu.edu. I’ll collect them for a subsequent column.

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