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Comprehensiveness in Content



Before journalism went online, journalists fortunate enough to work at news organizations willing to pay for excellence made the most of the available media forms to communicate with depth and breadth. The best newspapers pursued thorough investigative journalism and ran series with lengthy stories and sidebars. At their best, magazines covering public issues and social trends allotted thousands of words to thoughtfully reported stories. Both commercial TV networks and good local stations invested in in-depth projects, and public television and radio did insightful long-form work.

The pressures of profit and competition in recent years have eroded many news organizations' efforts to cover topics comprehensively. Those pressures have squeezed online operations as well as old-media outlets, many of which operate under the same corporate roof.¹

¹As noted in Chapter 2, the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism's annual State of the News Media reports (e.g., 2010) detail the economic challenges faced by news organizations and their owners.

But despite the intense economic squeeze on journalism, creative journalists have found ways to harness the distinctive capacity of the web to tell stories.

Online journalism has the potential to be more thorough than journalism in any other medium. It can provide materials in multiple forms that free journalists from the bounds of text-based stories and space limitations. Its flexibility in form of presentation allows journalists to tailor elements of a story to the ways people learn best. The best online journalism models the idea that the whole of something can be greater than the sum of its parts. The nature of the medium is part of the foundation of excellence online, but the medium's potential depends on the efforts of journalists and the priorities of their organizations. The complex nature of the medium also poses distinctive challenges in storytelling, and these challenges add to the difficulties that journalists face thanks to time and staffing limitations. This combination of factors makes it difficult to realize the potential of online journalism to tell comprehensive stories.

This chapter will:

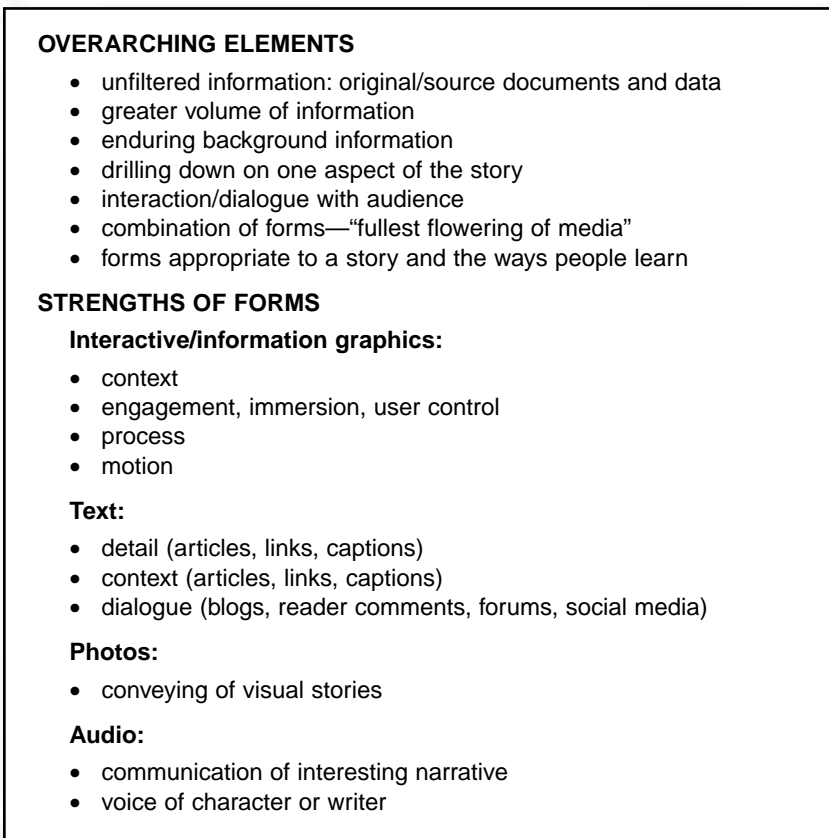
- Map out what comprehensiveness in content means online. This discussion will again draw on the insights of the journalists interviewed, and examples from them and others, to consider what a standard of excellence looks like. The discussion and examples here are relevant to breaking news but focus on non-breaking multimedia projects—places where one would expect to see comprehensive work. This look at comprehensiveness will explore the strengths of important forms that go into online journalism—text, graphics, audio, photos, and video—as well as the broader strengths of online presentation.
- Consider the challenges to achieving comprehensiveness in coverage—challenges from pressures on journalists and from the nature of the medium itself.
- Use philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's theory of a practice to help in sorting out the potential and pitfalls in online work. By pursuing a standard of excellence of comprehensiveness, which shows up online in distinctive ways, journalists help realize internal goods such as knowledge and inquiry and reshape what excellent journalism looks like. But they also encounter roadblocks along the way, partly because of the pressures of external goods such as profit in online operations. Virtues—personal qualities such as initiative and perseverance—are important to overcoming these barriers.

- Profile a multimedia producer on the job to show how she manages the multiple tasks of a video project.

❖ **INSIGHTS FROM ONLINE JOURNALISTS: WHAT COMPREHENSIVENESS MEANS**

Comprehensiveness in online journalism takes in the distinctive strengths of the forms that contribute to the medium, but it also involves strengths that encompass more than one form. Figure 4.1 provides a roadmap of comprehensiveness shaped by the thoughts of the journalists interviewed for this book. This section will take an in-depth look at this map.

Figure 4.1 Comprehensiveness: Mapping a Standard of Excellence



(Continued)

Figure 4.1 (Continued)**Video:**

- process
- motion
- “narrowly specific”/enhancement of text
- source talking at length
- human element
- interesting narrative
- documentary style—reporter not intrusive, focus on experiencing the event
- flexibility in format and length
- authenticity/not always highly produced
- high-quality reporting and analysis

Overarching Elements

Comprehensiveness in online journalism means going deep and wide with information. It also means fostering opportunities for interaction and making the most of the multiple forms of communication available online.

Unfiltered information: original/source documents and data

One distinctive feature of comprehensive coverage is unfiltered (or less filtered) information—primary-source documents and data that enable users to take more control. Alex Johnson, a projects reporter at msnbc.com, explains this point:

When you really boil it down, what I think distinguishes what we can do online is, curiously, we can eliminate the filter and the middleman. Yeah, I can write you a synthesized, well-reported, well-crafted story. But that’s not ultimately the same experience as seeing the material for yourself. What I love about this is that I can do both.

Johnson says he uses the tools of online journalism to remove the barrier of “the traditional impartial, objective journalism model in which the person with the byline is sort of a de facto expert, and you have to take that person’s word for it.” But he isn’t throwing out the traditional story.

I write a traditional news story for almost everything I do. But I want to give you as much of the original material as I can, that is appropriate, as is allowable in some cases, maybe under legal things or confidentiality agreements. Essentially I'm showing you my work. It's like I'm taking a test, and I'm showing you my work so you can decide for yourself—if I got to the right answer, and if I got to the right answer in the right way. It's a way of trusting the intelligence of an intelligent reader.

A 2009 article Johnson wrote about the inability of many 911 emergency call centers to identify the location of cell phone callers included a link to a site that provided a nationwide map and county-by-county details about local emergency service capabilities (Mandata, 2008). Johnson said this information let readers see the worst problem areas and “draw their own conclusion about whether we were characterizing the data appropriately.” The story shows how harnessing the ability of online journalism to provide data underlying reporting can advance the internal goods of knowledge and inquiry by enabling users to dig for themselves to corroborate and even add to the information an article itself provides.

Jennifer Johnson Hicks, a news editor for WSJ.com, echoes the point that online journalists should not abandon traditional news judgment: “I absolutely think we need to play a role in telling the readers what's important.” But she points to the priority of giving readers greater control over how they see information. That might mean something like *The Wall Street Journal's* CEO Compensation Scorecard, a chart that enabled readers to compare compensation of various corporate executives (Lobb & Phillips, 2007). The chart was sortable by name of executive, company, industry, compensation, and perks. This kind of chart, like the external link with Johnson's cell phone story, gives readers the power to inquire more deeply on their own.

Greater volume of information

Giving readers documents to scrutinize for themselves or interesting data to mine is much easier with the capacity of the web for information. Providing these materials on a news site or linking to them increases the volume of information readily available. But excellence in this area still depends on organizations and journalists deciding to invest the time and money to present it. Many stories still go onto the web without realizing the capability to provide vastly more supporting material than is possible in newspapers, commercial TV outlets, and even public TV and radio.

Enduring background information

Alan Boyle, science editor for msnbc.com, notes that online journalism, which excels at providing immediate information, can also provide enduring background. “You actually can have more permanence than you do in the newspaper or a magazine.”

News organizations have begun realizing the potential available in current and archived material grouped by topic. *The New York Times*, for example, created Times Topics (n.d.), which offers free access to information on thousands of subjects. The material includes text of articles as well as photos, graphics, audio, and video. For some topics, the feature goes deeper with materials such as introductory essays, documents selected by *Times* researchers, and links to websites and articles elsewhere. An article on the *Times* site itself noted that “those efforts have not yielded heavy reader traffic or much advertising” (Pérez-Peña, 2009). But it also pointed out that Google was experimenting with an enhanced news topic feature called Living Stories (Google Living Stories, n.d.) working with both the *Times* and *The Washington Post*.

These kinds of aggregations of previous stories or multimedia materials can not only enhance users’ knowledge in a particular moment but also enhance long-term knowledge because they are accessible over a long period of time. And the variety of material, visuals as well as text, enables inquiry in flexible directions according to users’ interests and needs.

Drilling down on one aspect of the story

In addition to providing source materials, background, and greater volume of information, comprehensive online journalism can, as NYTimes.com chief producer for investigations Eric Owles puts it, “drill down” on one aspect of a story. He made the point talking about a multimedia segment produced with a larger project on “Africa’s Children: Struggles of Youth” (Lafraniere, Polgreen, & Wines, 2006). He said he had seen an article being filed for the newspaper and focused on one small element of it for the multimedia piece. In this case, audio narration, accompanied by photos, takes viewers

through the process of—this is a young kid in Africa’s day. This is what it’s like to wake up early in the morning, go out in a fishing boat, be too weak to do all the work that they’re doing because they don’t have any food and being exhausted and getting hit and things like that from the people that are supposed to be taking care of them.

The focus of the segment on individual children in slavery brought home the broader point of the package.

A powerful example of drilling down on an aspect of the story comes from StarTribune.com in Minneapolis. The site presented a multimedia project about the collapse of the Interstate 35W bridge into the Mississippi River in August 2007, which killed 13 people and injured 144 others (Louwagie et al., 2007). One of the features of the project was an extended aerial photo of the bridge tagged with numbers showing locations of both the survivors and those who died on and around the bridge. Where information was available, the numbers linked to stories about the individuals, some with video interviews and photo galleries. These stories about individuals enabled users to learn the particular stories of the people affected.

The ability to go deep into a single element of the story is not unique to online journalism. In newspapers and magazines, sidebars focus on stories of individuals who were victims of disaster, explain a complicated aspect of a business trend, or provide reaction in a political controversy. TV pieces are particularly suited for showing the stories of people in difficulty. But the multiplicity of storytelling forms available online means that journalists can use the full range of tools of other media to drill down, singly or together, plus those unique to online work such as interactive graphics.

Interaction/dialogue with audience

Like the ability to take a story deeper in multiple ways, the opportunity for interaction and dialogue with the audience is a distinctive strength of the online version of comprehensive journalism. Ju-Don Roberts, former managing editor for washingtonpost.com, considers this characteristic central in the definition of online storytelling: “What makes online storytelling is if it’s dynamic, if it’s interactive. That’s what I think distinguishes a story from a web story. It’s not how long it is.” What is crucial is using the potential of the medium, she says.

Are you giving your users another opportunity to engage with you? Is it a monologue or a dialogue? And online storytelling should always be a dialogue, that your users have some way to give you some kind of input or feedback into what you’re doing or other ways to interact.

Interaction and dialogue take on a host of forms. Some, such as photo galleries and video, involve just engagement of attention and clicking, so they are interactive only in the most minimal sense. Others,

such as polls and reader comments on articles, involve explicit feedback from users, but they do not necessarily lead into dialogue. Sometimes, though, reader comments on stories get other readers engaged in discussion, and comments to bloggers can get both the commenters and the blogger interacting directly. The development of social media such as Twitter and Facebook has enhanced this aspect of online storytelling by multiplying the channels of communication among journalists and interested citizens. Chapters 5 and 6 will look more extensively at interaction and dialogue with the public, through social media and other means. But this is a crucial feature of comprehensiveness in online journalism, so it is important to mention here. Taken together, the tools for online interaction can help to enhance the knowledge of audience members and sharpen the inquiry that both journalists and users pursue on issues.

Combination of forms—“fullest flowering of media”

The rich combination of forms possible in online journalism—when journalists make the most of the medium—is collectively part of the meaning of comprehensiveness online. Tom Kennedy, who spent 11 years as managing editor for multimedia at washingtonpost.com and 10 years as director of photography for National Geographic Society before that, sees this new medium in development “as really in a lot of ways an amalgamation of previous media, possibly with its own unique twists and variants, ultimately.” He borrows from the thinking of Marshall McLuhan, a media scholar whose work was popular in the 1960s (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). Kennedy says that McLuhan saw television as “a throwback to a tradition of storytelling that was really sort of the archetype from the dawn of time—the idea of fusing imagery with oral storytelling tradition.” In Kennedy’s view, the online medium continues the fusion of imagery with oral storytelling but also joins it with content based on text. “This is perhaps the fullest flowering of media in recent times simply because being online you have the opportunity to present utilizing all the previously existing forms of media and combining them in new ways.”

This “flowering” of journalism online is possible not only because of the individual forms of presentation but also because of the depth and breadth that together they allow. Journalists who harness the aggregate potential of the medium to increase the knowledge of the audience are helping to redefine what excellent journalism means. On a good day, this pursuit of excellence might help to realize the *telos*, or goal, that Sandra Borden cited “to help citizens know well

in the public sphere” (2007, p. 50). That goal is in keeping with how Kennedy views the pursuit of online excellence:

I think the excellence is about exploring the potentialities right now and trying to deliver on the collective promise of journalism as a social force to inform and educate people and to give them tools to lead a better life—however one wants to interpret that.

The idea that comprehensive online journalism might help people “to lead a better life” also points to the broader purpose in virtue ethics of helping humans to flourish.

Forms appropriate to a story and the ways people learn

Paige West, director of the Interactive Studio for msnbc.com, notes that the flexibility of presentation form online enables journalists to present stories in forms most appropriate to the story being told and how people learn. Journalists can choose from any or all online forms to “take a story and tell it in the best possible way as opposed to making it fit into text if you’re a newspaper or video if you’re a broadcast station or radio if you’re radio.” The overlap that may come with using multiple forms can work to the user’s advantage, West says.

That gives the user the choice in how they consume their information, and people learn in different ways. So some people are very visual, and some people need to read, and some people need to listen. Other people need to do.

Online journalism is extraordinarily versatile. The best of it achieves depth and breadth by making the most of the forms that provide the building blocks of the medium. When journalists realize this potential, they help users to learn and inquire to a fuller extent than was possible through old media.

One example of this kind of excellence is the *Post’s* “Fixing D.C.’s Schools” (2007), an investigative project analyzing the continuing difficulties in the District’s public schools and why the problems persist. The project includes several sets of articles; multimedia segments such as one about eight teachers at a high school with text, images, and audio; question-and-answer transcripts; and responses from readers. One of the most powerful elements of the project is an interactive map database that lets users roll over dots showing schools on a map of the District and compare data including percentage of passing grades, crime incidents, percentage of qualified teachers, amount

of delay in repairs, and health inspection violations. Users can also add layers including the poverty levels in the areas of these schools. Comparing even a few dots in different parts of the District underlines the huge disparities in conditions from wealthy to poor areas. The elements in the project are a prime example of making the most of online forms and realizing the potential of their combination. Kennedy puts it this way:

Whether you're a person who's driven by data or whether you're a person who really needs a narrative story to engage you or pull you in or whether you're a person who is moved by imagery, it's a mechanism of understanding that all those aspects are there. Plus we have the ability to allow for interaction with the reporters who are involved in the series or their editors, as well as sharing stories maybe true about a specific school, so that you've got this ability to engage the community and give them an opportunity to talk back.

This package draws on the strengths of multiple approaches to bring the problems of D.C. schools home to a wide range of users. In MacIntyre's terms, it engages them in inquiry in depth and enhances their knowledge of a problem of continuing and great importance to the District. The creative combination of forms models a new kind of excellence in investigative journalism. It is an example of how online journalism can help citizens "know well," in Borden's terms (2007, p. 50). Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television have often helped to advance this goal through thoughtful and engaging reporting on public problems. Online journalism can easily fall short of equaling the best of these media, but it has the potential to contribute to public knowledge in ways that no single one of them has done.

The next section will look more closely at what several online forms can contribute in storytelling.

Strengths of Forms

Comprehensiveness online depends on how stories are told in the nuances of various online forms including interactive/information graphics, text, audio, photos, and video.

Interactive/information graphics

Online graphics can provide rich context, as the D.C. schools example illustrates. Graphics are valuable not only for that kind of long-term project but also for breaking news. West of msnbc.com talked about the

value of interactive maps and timelines for providing context to people who are coming late into a developing news story.

I think timelines are good; I think step-by-step descriptions of what happened exactly are what people want to know in a breaking news situation. If it's a location-based story then maps are very important, any sort of graphics that give people a reference in context for where the events occurred. If you can combine those two things so that you've got both a map and a timeline together, I think that's even better.

West noted that video and text stories don't work so well for retaining old information along with new material.

A news report is going to bring out the new stuff all the time on television. A text story—maybe you update a story, but maybe that updated paragraph gets embedded a third of the way through the story that somebody's already read, and are they going to read that story again?

Whether they are used with fast-breaking stories or longer-developing ones, interactive graphics can enhance user knowledge through their ability to clearly present compilations of information.

A timeline on msnbc.com provided context for the economic crisis that hit hard in fall 2008 ("Economy in Turmoil," 2008). West, e-mailing in early 2009, said the timeline was created "to show people the events as far back as August 2007 that had forecast the current crisis." The timeline went up in October 2008 and was updated during the next several weeks as the crisis developed. "The cool thing about this is that it's not just a timeline," West wrote. "It's also a chart that shows the relative levels of the Dow Jones, unemployment rates, home prices, problem mortgages, crude oil and gas prices." Along with another multimedia piece showing users the "Winners and Losers" in the financial crisis (no longer online), this "really helped round out the picture of what was going on for people who were caught by surprise or that may not be immersed in the verbiage of economists and policy makers."

West also says graphics allow for greater engagement, immersion, and user control than linear forms like text and video. Another msnbc.com project illustrating these strengths was the Politics Dashboard (2008), a feature that included maps and information on the 2008 election campaign. A Data Explorer tab—affectionately known as "Dora the Explora," West says—let users pore through a huge amount of information connected with the election. (It now displays a results map.)

We had data on fundraising of all Presidential and Congressional candidates broken down by location (state or county), source (individual, PAC, etc.), and amount. We had demographic data such as population, age, gender, race/ethnicity, income, education, and percent below poverty from the census by state and county. We had the latest polling information by state going back several months so users could see how states were trending the closer we got to the election. We had the voting results for Presidential and Congressional elections going back to 1988. It's an amazing amount of information that you could explore for hours finding interesting patterns and correlations in the data, allowing users to play political wonk and predict the outcome.

This kind of graphic is significant in the broader development of the practice of journalism. Informational graphics became a prominent feature of newspaper and magazine presentations of news starting in the 1980s. Graphics such as the charts that *USA Today* has run for years on its front page strengthen the visual storytelling capability of journalism. Interactive online graphics represent a further step in the evolution of visual storytelling excellence because they not only present information in clear and interesting ways but also empower users to interact in numerous ways of their choosing. The combination of quantity and breadth of data with flexible means of exploration provides users the ability to inquire and learn in a deeper way than they could through other media forms.

Interactive graphics can also be effective explaining a process or motion, as Robert Hood, supervising producer for multimedia at msnbc.com, notes. One topic in which graphics have worked well to analyze motion is sports. NYTimes.com used interactive graphics during the 2008 Summer Olympics to, among other things, explain amazing feats by athletes. One interactive feature (Carter et al., 2008) showed how sprinter Usain Bolt of Jamaica blazed through the 100 meters and set a world record of 9.69 seconds. Clicking through the frames of the graphic, users saw illustrations of his position in relation to other runners along the way, text explaining how he used his size and stride to his advantage, and visual breakdowns illustrating how he moved so quickly. This graphic did more to explain what he did than text alone and also more than a printed graphic showing some of the same motion would have.

Text

Text stories, the mainstay of newspapers and magazines, provide detail and context, as Hood points out. The sites where these journalists

work and many others are full of examples of text stories that do this, whether written also to appear in print or only online. Here are two:

- Bill Dedman, an investigative reporter for msnbc.com, wrote a story giving context after a jet hit a flock of birds and landed in the Hudson River in New York in January 2009 (Dedman, 2009)—an event discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Though not lengthy, the article looked at reasons that collisions with birds are increasing. Statistics about bird strikes in the United States and worldwide provided detail for the story. The statistics could have been presented in a chart, but the reasons with explanation worked particularly well in the format of a story.

- An investigation by *The Seattle Times* documented the threat to hospital patients in Washington State from the antibiotic-resistant germ MRSA, which has been spreading rapidly with the help of inconsistent efforts to prevent infection (Berens & Armstrong, 2009). The project included online elements such as graphics, a slideshow, and a searchable database. But articles with the three parts of this series provided important explanation and background. For example, in the first story, reporters Michael J. Berens and Ken Armstrong (2008) explained the holes in data reporting that allow cases to go undocumented and the deficiencies in hospital practices that allow these bacteria to flourish. A conventional text story like this takes some work to read through, but it provides depth of information that would be difficult to develop without some length of text.

Another use of text that is important in online journalism is links. Hyperlinks are at the heart of the identity of the online medium because they enable navigation to other elements on the site and information elsewhere. Like stories themselves, links can help to provide detail and context—for example, by sending readers to sites that offer expert knowledge, explain points of view, or show how to get help. The Seattle series on MRSA models helpful use of links. It points readers to:

- Consumer advocacy groups—Consumers Union, MRSA Survivors Network, and the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths.
- Government resources—the Washington State Department of Health and federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Professional groups—the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology and the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America.

The pages with these links also offer context through brief explanations of the types of information available on these sites.

Links are so much a part of the medium that it is easy to take them for granted, but they are integral to online excellence. A key difference between simply shoveling newspaper stories onto a website and providing added value to users is the decision to offer direct ways to connect with additional opportunities for learning.

One other textual element providing detail and context is captions. Good captions give people concise but vital explanation of what photos are showing and sometimes background information as well. Like articles, captions are not unique to new media. But they have gained new life as a vital informational connector in slideshows that are common on online news sites. They also play a role in communication through graphics, as the previous section noted.

The Washington Post used captions to enhance clarity in a slideshow on its website about the strong earthquake that hit Haiti in January 2010 ("Major Earthquake Hits Haiti," 2010). One photo appeared with this caption:

With the Supreme Court building burning in the background, a woman walks past a dead body that lays in a street in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where relief workers have descended to help victims of the massive Jan. 12 earthquake.

The caption provided enough information to explain why the woman was covering her face and what building appeared in the background. It also added context by noting that relief workers had come to the area. Although it is unlikely that readers would not have known about the relief effort at that point, the additional background helped to set up the rest of the slideshow. This information appeared at the opening of the slideshow until later photos pushed it back.

Aside from its role in providing detail and context, text provides an important vehicle for dialogue online. That dialogue may come through blogs and reader comments on them, reader comments on stories, discussion forums, or interactions through social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Text provides a way to engage in discussion easily and quickly or at length. Chapter 6 will look in detail at the role of dialogue in online journalism.

Photos

Photo galleries and slideshows with audio appear often in online presentations. Even though the online medium, like broadcasting,

enables the use of video, still images have found a key place in online storytelling through these modes of presentation. Hood, who brings extensive training in photography to his work, notes that still photos retain power online for telling visual stories.

Photos from the disaster in Haiti on [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) (“Major Earthquake Hits Haiti,” 2010) illustrate the power of still photography online. Scores of gripping images showed pain and difficulties that were everywhere, such as:

- A teenage girl recovering from a leg amputation.
- A rescuer hugging a search dog as other workers looked through the rubble of a cathedral.
- A nun and rescue workers praying over the body of a church leader.
- An aerial shot of makeshift tents.
- Huge crowds standing in line for food.
- A Haitian policeman aiming his rifle into a crowd.



Screenshot 4.1 Slideshows such as this one from [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) used powerful images to bring home the extent of suffering after the earthquake that ravaged Haiti in January 2010.

Individually, each of these pictures says something about a slice of the human impact of the earthquake. Unlike video, as frozen images, they enable viewers to focus attention on each one. Together, they work to bring out both the scope and depth of the tragedy as people click through or autoplay the slideshow.

A very different story, but another with visual impact, was the collapse of the Dallas Cowboys' practice facility during a thunderstorm in May 2009. Dallasnews.com, the website of *The Dallas Morning News*, covered the collapse and its aftermath with blog entries, Twitter feeds, video from WFAA-TV, 911 audio, and stories and photos ("Dallas Cowboys Practice Facility Collapses," 2009). These elements work together to give people a range of knowledge in forms that would communicate well to a variety of users, but again the photos play a central role. This was a visually dramatic story, and a gallery helped convey that with images showing the shredded white remnants of the building resting on the green practice fields.

In developing news stories such as these as well as in feature projects, still photos carry a distinctive kind of visual weight individually and collectively.

Audio

Audio brings its own distinctive strengths to online storytelling. For one thing, as Hood notes, it can communicate interesting narrative. For example, a slideshow with photos by Nicole Frugé of the *San Antonio Express-News* uses audio with the voice of Staff Sgt. Daniel Barnes, who had to have both legs amputated after a rocket-propelled grenade hit his vehicle during a road-clearing mission near Baghdad, Iraq, on September 4, 2006 (Frugé, 2009). The story of what happened to him and his feelings about it is quiet but powerful:

- The attack—with a fireball, smoke, soldiers yelling, and Barnes unable to move and blacking out.
- Barnes fighting with medical staff when he woke up, then seeing his wife by surprise when she is brought in to calm him down.
- Adjusting to life since the amputation.
- Wanting to give up at times but thankful to be alive, with the support of his family.
- Making plans for life back home.

The story would have been gripping in other forms, too, but hearing this narrative from Barnes makes it more compelling, especially combined with photos of him and related shots woven in with the sound.

Related to the idea of communicating narrative is the ability of audio to convey the voice of a character in a story or sometimes the writer. Lisa Tozzi, a deputy editor on the *Times* national desk, says:

The most effective multimedia pieces that we do are the ones where we can give people a taste of the characters that are involved. . . . Our writers are fantastic, but there's something about hearing somebody's voice or seeing somebody's face that can make a real difference in a lot of pieces.

One example comes from a *Times* series called "House Afire," in which reporter David Gonzalez (2007) spent a year with members of a Pentecostal church in a storefront in Harlem. This series includes both text stories and multimedia. An audio slideshow communicates the voices of young people in the church. The audio provides a stronger flavor of these young people and their perspectives of faith. For example, Juan Carlos Matias voices his old attitude toward church: being "forced to go" with his mother threatening to withhold his allowance, not thinking about salvation.

Sometimes audio serves well when the writer's own voice may add insight for the audience. Bill Brink, a senior editor at the *Times*, says: "I think there will be stories where it's clearly preferable to have a subject talking and maybe some where it's clearly preferable to have a writer talking. That may be where the writer's expertise is so overwhelming."

A *Times* science writer, for example, might speak at a high level of expertise about a complicated topic but do it in a conversational way that a general readership will understand.

Video

Video has traveled an interesting road in online news since the early days of Internet journalism in the 1990s. At first, the prevalence of slow Internet connections made it difficult to use video at all in online storytelling, let alone to explore and develop its potential. But in the past decade, video has started coming into its own in online journalism. With the development of video-sharing sites such as YouTube and phones and simple cameras that take and show video, the opportunities to create and distribute video stories have exploded. Engaging

video that serves journalistic purposes is produced by veterans of television, transplants from print journalism, and citizens with no training in the field. Compelling stories appear in the polished forms of television videographers and in the raw forms of ordinary citizens.

Video brings a number of strengths to online storytelling, some overlapping with the strengths of other online forms and others more distinctive.

Process or motion: Like graphics, video can show how things work and move, as Hood points out. A feature on auto repairs might show how a mechanic reassembles an engine. Coverage of sports events brings to life the drama of a race down the football field.

Specific enhancement of text: David Patton, former senior editor at WSJ.com, sees value in online video that is “narrowly specific” and enhances story text, complementing rather than duplicating. He points to an amateur video of Asian silver carp showing the fish, which are multiplying in U.S. waters, leaping behind a boat on a tributary of the Missouri River. The video, introduced by a *Journal* reporter who wrote the story, showed readers what these fish do more vividly than the text could have. (For the video and reporter comments, see “Jumping Carp,” n.d.)

A source talking at length: Online video can also communicate clearly the thoughts of an intelligent news source. Alex Johnson of msnbc.com says: “I think the best video online, especially in the news format, is *verité* . . . just turn the camera on and ask somebody an open-ended question and just let them talk.” If someone is knowledgeable and has an interesting perspective, he argues, “The best person to give that perspective is the person with the perspective.” As an example, he cites a video profile (Brunker, 2009) of Paul Thomas, the unofficial historian of Elkhart, Indiana, where a year-long project (Aleccia et al., n.d.) focused on the impact of the recession on the town. Thomas, 85 years old, speaks articulately about the history of Elkhart and its changes in industry.

The human element/interesting narrative: Andrea Hamilton, West Coast news editor for msnbc.com, points out the strength of online video for focusing on people engaged in activities or telling their stories.

Kari Huus, a reporter for msnbc.com, worked on a story in which video communicated this human element. She wrote an article about roller derby, a roller skating sport in which women with nicknames

such as Kim Reaper and Sybil Unrest and team names like Derby Liberation Front compete aggressively on arena tracks in garb such as fishnets and miniskirts. The article is accompanied by multimedia elements including video showing women racing and one commenting in an interview. (For story and multimedia, see Huus, 2006.) Users who click to the video go through a presentation window titled “Wicked Curves.” Huus says:

It’s not the best-produced video that ever was, but you can see some of these personalities. And if I just quoted them, you’ll see the text and you don’t get—it’s really hard to convey all the craziness in words.

Video that shows a human element and an engaging story normally relies partly on the power of the audio, but audio alone in a story like this would not easily convey the vivid look and activity of the contestants, either.

Focus on the event, not the reporter: Journalistic video online often uses documentary style in which the reporter is not intrusive and the focus is on letting the audience experience the event. Ju-Don Roberts, formerly of *washingtonpost.com*, says:

We feel like our best video is video where the reporter is invisible to what’s taking place—that you really are hearing the story or experiencing the event through the participants in that event, or through the main subject of a narrative.

A powerful example of documentary style without an intrusive reporter is a three-part video on *washingtonpost.com* documenting Inauguration Day 2009. The focus on experiencing the event is reflected in the title: “In the Moment: Witnessing Barack Obama’s Historic Inauguration” (2009). This mini-documentary, lasting a total of about eight minutes, has three parts: The first focuses on the swearing in, the second on the inaugural parade, and the third on the celebrations into the night. There is no reporter narration the entire time, and no reporters appear on camera. The focus is on scenes, sounds, faces, and the voices of people present.

Jim Brady, former executive editor of *washingtonpost.com*, identified the *Post*’s philosophy of online video as “story driven” like print journalism in contrast with the more “personality driven” approach that often appears in broadcast television. Some of the best local television pieces, network TV news magazines, and public television focus

on the story in documentary fashion, but commercial TV news does often put the reporter in a more central place.

Excellent online video can still put a reporter on camera when that is important to the story. Ju-Don Roberts points out that the reporter is sometimes needed to explain context in an in-depth story.

Sometimes putting a reporter on camera may simply help to get the audience interested in the story. Newspaper columnists and other well-known reporters may help attract attention and interest because they can build on their connection with viewers.

Flexibility in format and length: Interesting web video shows up in a variety of shapes and sizes. Pieces tend to be brief. Ann Derry, editorial director for video and television at the *Times*, says people typically don't want to watch something the length of a full documentary.



Screenshot 4.2 Many online videos are short, but flexibility in length also makes it possible to do documentary-style pieces such as a 10-minute story about undisclosed accidents in New York State during radiation treatment.

Some *Times* video is longer, though, like a 10-minute story exploring the fact that New York state law does not require accidents in radiation treatment to be made public (Farrell & Harris, 2010). A story like this about medical dangers with life-and-death implications is likely to keep viewers engaged. Length can follow the needs of the story, Derry says:

The thing that we really have an advantage with on the web is that the story can dictate its length. You're not trying to put it into a slot. When you've come from television for as long as I've been, you have to slot things into the time slot. But there's no time slot. There's not even a word count.

Format is also flexible because pieces don't have to fit into the container of a television show. *Times* video work, Derry says, is "informed by all the kinds of things that you do on TV, but you don't have to only have a food network and only do an hour-long cooking show."

Times video comes in multiple forms, including many packages with journalist narration, interviewees on camera, and "B-roll" footage of scenes and activity. Other segments are focused on reporters speaking as experts. The tone is often the subdued style of public television and serious local and network TV pieces. But some segments break out of that and have more fun—such as a repeated feature with technology writer David Pogue called "The Baiting Game." In one, Pogue reviews products in a mock game show format "where we tempt a customer with three delicious-looking smart phones and only later tell her what's wrong with them" (Pogue, 2009). In MacIntyre's (2007) formal terms, these segments in various ways advance the internal good of knowledge, engaging viewers by both serious and humorous means.

Authenticity/not always highly produced: Another distinctive feature of video for online journalism is that it does not have to be as highly produced as a polished television package and, in fact, may appear more authentic if it is not. Adam Najberg, senior editor for video at *The Wall Street Journal*, thinks of online journalistic video this way:

It's showing people something cool that they otherwise wouldn't see. You can mention user-generated cell phone video in a story, and it completely lacks the impact of seeing two or three examples of that strung together. It's when you do a story on flying carp and how they're disrupting waterways: Seeing that just has so much more impact. It explains why YouTube is so great now. YouTube to me is not journalism: It lacks a really good editor and filter, but what they do is what a lot of media outlets like to do online with the editors and the filters in place. . . . I think a lot of this stuff is still being defined now. The one thing I'm sure of is that it doesn't involve high production value because you don't want to do web video as TV on the web. I think that looking slick is not the point. Being there, making the viewer part of the experience, share in that experience, that's the name of the game and that means it's all about the *Wall Street Journal*

reporter who's showing land mines being detonated by explosive experts in Iraq. It's not a reporter standing in front of the camera with a stick microphone talking about it and maybe showing in ten seconds, that's not what it's about.

What represents excellence in online video may continue developing for a number of years, but it seems clear that strong online video for journalism doesn't require the production polish of a commercial TV package—though that is sometimes present. As journalistic video online continues evolving, it is likely to proceed on a range of paths from raw to highly polished. The prevalence of cell phone cameras and the contributions of citizen video (see Chapter 5) will make plenty of “authentic” video with low production values but important information available. At the same time, web operations that grew out of television news will keep drawing on the supply of more polished video created by journalists trained in television. And news organizations with roots in print journalism may pursue ventures with television as they keep fighting to compete. (See the profile at the end of this chapter for an example of a joint venture between a newspaper-based web operation and a local TV station.)

High-quality reporting and analysis: Even if online video does not look like the network nightly newscasts, it still benefits from the quality of reporting and analysis that conscientious journalists, whatever their medium, provide. Conversations with journalists for this book made clear that they pride themselves on the expertise of the reporters whose work feeds the online operation. Derry sees reporter expertise—whether it be through the reporter talking directly or just doing reporting well—as central to the value added in *Times* video. Her thoughts underline the fact that excellent online video journalism has to be grounded in excellent newsgathering, which Borden (2007) viewed as vital to a practice in which reporting is central.

Comprehensiveness Through an Ethical Lens

As in the discussion of breaking news in Chapter 3, MacIntyre's (2007) theory of a practice provides a framework that helps in understanding comprehensiveness online and how pursuing it redefines excellence in journalism.

A standard of excellence in comprehensiveness online includes provision of source documents and data, enduring background, and generally a greater volume of information. It means going deep on single aspects

of a story and pursuing interaction or dialogue with the audience. It also means making the most of the combination of available forms to tell a story most effectively and connect best with a variety of audience members. Major building blocks of comprehensive storytelling online—text, graphics, audio, photos, and video—all have distinctive strengths.

As the previous section hinted, journalists and organizations that pursue comprehensiveness in coverage help to achieve internal goods, distinctive outgrowths of the practice of journalism. In the case of comprehensiveness, two of those discussed by Borden (2007), knowledge and inquiry, are particularly relevant. Knowledge is relevant because journalists who pursue the standard of excellence provide more information and information closer to the original sources. And by using multiple forms in ways most appropriate to the story and the audience, they make the most of the opportunity to add to individual audience members' knowledge. Communication of primary sources also enhances inquiry by letting users dig for themselves. Interaction and dialogue engage them more actively as inquirers.

As with speed and accuracy in breaking news, pursuit of comprehensiveness and achievement of these goods puts in motion a dynamic discussed by MacIntyre (2007) and applied to journalism by Edmund Lambeth (1992) and by Borden (2007). Many of the elements of online comprehensiveness existed in previous forms of journalism, but pursuing them online reframes what excellence in journalism means and enhances the ability of journalists to achieve it. For example, the use of graphics that are interactive and build on databases of public information makes excellence something that more actively engages audience members in exploring the data and drawing their own conclusions. These approaches also empower journalists to report more deeply.

The next section will focus on the challenges journalists face in pursuing this standard of excellence as they wrestle with both external goods and the nature of the medium itself.

❖ CHALLENGES TO COMPREHENSIVENESS

The previous section painted a glorious picture of the potential of online journalism to provide comprehensive coverage. But time and staffing limitations, along with the multifaceted and complex nature of the medium itself, can be enough to derail the best efforts of talented journalists. There is a high danger that the actual product will fall short of the best of what television did with video, radio with audio, and newspapers and magazines with text articles and still photos. There is

also a danger that online journalism will often fail to make the most of the possibilities for these elements working together.

Time and Staffing Pressures

The discussion of speed and accuracy in Chapter 3 showed that time pressures and limited staffs challenge journalists doing breaking news. But time to pursue in-depth multimedia work apart from breaking news also is hard to find. West of msnbc.com points out that the pressure of daily news never stops, making it difficult to pursue interactive projects, the area she oversees.

Likewise, Tozzi of the *Times*, who has coordinated producers for the web operation, sees challenges from time and staffing limits—even at one of the largest web news organizations in the United States.

You do have lots of projects coming at you and not a lot of people to handle those projects. I feel like the biggest challenge we face is just trying to do so many things and do them well.

There is no way to do journalism in any medium without limited time or staffing, especially in the atmosphere of economic pressure in the early 21st century. But these limits still threaten the ability of online journalism to achieve its potential. It is easy for superficiality rather than comprehensiveness to become the norm, especially with the multitasking involved in planning and coordination of multiple forms including some with time-consuming technical aspects. On the news-gathering side, limited staffing—especially in small operations—may mean the same person interviews and shoots video. Writing or follow-up questioning for a text story may get squeezed by the time reviewing and editing, or helping to edit, video.

The extent to which these challenges relate to what MacIntyre (2007) called external goods, such as profit or status, depends on how much the institutions that house these news organizations are committed to investments of excellence for the good of the public. But no news organization has unlimited money, and the broad slowdown in the economy has added to the financial pressures news organizations were already facing. It was evident from the interviews with journalists for this book that they are conscientious and creative in their pursuit of high-quality journalism, even though they sometimes fall short. But the climate of competition, combined with broader economic stresses, makes it difficult to keep excellence at the forefront. For the journalists at small online operations, the challenges can be even greater.

Nature of the Medium

Along with the pressures of time and staffing, online journalists face challenges to comprehensiveness related to the nature of the medium. As the previous discussion pointed out, part of the problem comes from the simple fact that online storytelling encompasses several forms, including some that involve technical hurdles. For example, shooting video means understanding camera settings and video formats. Editing video or audio, or creating graphics, involves learning software that can also be complicated. It takes a complex set of thinking and technical skills to work in several forms at a high level of quality.

But the challenges go deeper. The complexity and multifaceted quality of the online medium as a whole can prove vexing for both journalists and their audiences. Online journalists face difficulty in unifying parts of a story and providing context for users entering and navigating in different ways. Mark Stevenson, senior news editor for msnbc.com, points out that the nonlinear nature of online communication means different users will have different experiences of a story. He contrasts it with the traditional inverted pyramid style of newspaper newswriting, which sent readers on one path from most to least important information. "Then, even if they jumped out they still had the best first or they had the foundation or the assumptions in what was going on." In online stories, readers might travel a different path and see a detail without first seeing the context that explains it. That reality leads to what Stevenson calls a kind of "blind men and the elephant" game.

You know there are a lot more blind people and there are a whole lot more different contact points with the elephant. But the story is still an elephant, and so we have to figure out ways to convey this is an elephant when we know that people are going to be coming in from the tail, from the ear, from the skin.

The "elephant" of an online story is difficult to build in a way that will aid the understanding of people coming from so many vantage points. Even in old media, users face choices of where to go first. Newspaper readers have to choose among headlines, photos and captions, graphics, information boxes, and sidebars. Television news viewers are locked into a linear story sequence, but in recent years they have also faced more and more headlines and summaries in text crawling across the screen. Online storytelling greatly multiplies the choices, though. That means excellent online storytelling calls for particularly careful thinking about the interconnections among the

elements and what knowledge and questions they will create when users navigate them.

That careful thinking must take place not only in the minds of individual journalists but also among the members of the whole team (if there is a team) contributing the parts and overseeing the story's development. Tom Kennedy, formerly of *washingtonpost.com*, says online storytelling calls for some big changes from the traditional organizational dynamics in print organizations. He sees print newsroom culture as "a culture of the silo where people typically are doing their work in isolation"—with some exceptions such as a reporter working with a photographer—up to a point when editors coordinate things. Online storytelling "requires a much more complex set of coordinations and consultations from the ground up." He likens the level of collaboration needed to what happens in filmmaking. The complexity of coordination and communication online will pose a continuing challenge to organizations' ability to do effective online work that deals comprehensively with stories.

The development of social media as a key component of online journalism has complicated the task of coordination but has also pointed toward new ways to integrate the pieces of an online story. *Msnbc.com* science editor Alan Boyle, who writes the *Cosmic Log* blog, talked in 2007 about a phase of online journalism that focused on breaking down the elements of storytelling into their individual components without a full grasp of their collective potential. Online journalists could put together something into a Lego construction, he said, "but I don't think we've gotten to the point where you can build a space shuttle out of Legos." Two years later, he was seeing a different phase developing shaped by social networking. For example, during the memorial service for singer Michael Jackson in July 2009, *msnbc.com* set up an interface that enabled users to tweet about the event while they watched it on video on the same screen. (See "Live Coverage," n.d., for a look at the interface and some of the Twitter feed.) To Boyle, that represents a shift toward greater blending of elements at a time when online journalists recognize they need to engage people who are both taking in news and contributing to it.

❖ OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES: VIRTUES IN ACTION

Handling the complexity of choices in online storytelling and the time constraints for online journalists depends on commitments by organizations

to strive for excellence. It also ultimately depends on the priorities of the profession of journalism as a whole. But as MacIntyre's (2007) theory of a practice makes clear, individual journalists are key players in the effort to strive for excellence.

The previous chapter looked at ways that the virtues of initiative and perseverance showed up in the work of the journalists interviewed. Those virtues are essential to comprehensive work in both breaking news and long-term projects. The journalists who experiment with new combinations of storytelling forms are showing initiative to try to make the most of the online medium, even if at some level they are spurred on by competition and may be drawing on approaches others have used. For example, Alex Johnson of *msnbc.com*, who talked about the importance of providing original source materials for users, shows initiative by pushing beyond the bounds of conventional text stories to connect people with information they can evaluate for themselves. By striving for this kind of transparency, he also reflects the virtue of honesty.

Perseverance shows itself in the long-term commitment to excellence on the part of many of the journalists interviewed. Like a number of others at *msnbc.com*, Andrea Hamilton came from a long background in print journalism including, for her, The Associated Press. Talking about her colleagues who are veteran journalists, she says:

They're not burned out; they're just dedicated journalists with a lot of experience. A lot of us could be burned out by now with our experience, the years we have behind us. I mean, I've been in this business for 25 years. I could be totally fried and it would not be unusual or unreasonable to be fried, but we're not. We're still passionate.

The same commitment Hamilton and veteran colleagues showed at *msnbc.com* was evident in conversations with many journalists at the *Post*, *Journal*, and *Times*, as well as with those at smaller organizations. All of them have been riding a wave of a developing medium with severe financial pressures and the backdrop of public criticism of mainstream media outlets. Some are younger and newer to the business, but both younger and older journalists have pushed for excellence.

Creativity is also a key virtue for making the most of storytelling forms in an era when journalists are still experimenting with the best standards online. Jenni Pinkley, who is profiled below, showed creativity and flexibility in handling a video assignment that might have seemed simple but was actually quite complex.

❖ ON-THE-JOB PROFILE: JENNI PINKLEY FACING THE DAILY CHALLENGES

For a conscientious online journalist, no story is too trivial to handle with care—including a story about a bar trivia contest. Jenni Pinkley’s work on a video feature about the “Trivia Mafia” in Minneapolis shows how many choices and challenges can arise even in what might seem like a routine project.



Photo 4.1 Shooting and editing video is a big part of Jenni Pinkley’s job at StarTribune.com in Minneapolis. Even a story that might seem simple can take perseverance and creativity to do well.

Pinkley works for StarTribune.com, the web operation of the *Star Tribune* newspaper. Her official title is multimedia producer, sports and entertainment coordinator, and it is a job with many responsibilities. She oversees production of video stories, including shooting and editing, and helps develop broadcast and multimedia skills of print reporters and photographers. She divides her time among shooting studio shows featuring sports reporters, finding and assigning video stories, and shooting weekly entertainment video in a joint venture with the CW television network. The partnership, in which revenue is shared between StarTribune.com and CW, means the entertainment features go on the website but also show weekly at 10 p.m. on the local CW station.

The bar trivia story (“CWTC Beat: Bar Trivia Is Hot at 331 Club,” 2010) is one of those pieces that Pinkley did for the website and CW. Her work on the project over parts of two days in January 2010 posed technical challenges and workflow difficulties. As with the other CW pieces, she worked with *Star Tribune* nightlife reporter Tom Horgen, one of the newsroom personalities the *Star Tribune* has been putting on camera for shows. This week, the story focused on the Trivia Mafia, which hosts trivia nights in bars across the Twin Cities area and was about to celebrate its third anniversary.

The segment of “The CW Twin Cities Beat” is introduced by two hosts, identified as Natalie and Mike. The finished package from the bar, about a minute long, includes:

- B-roll at the bar with sights and sounds of the contest in action, presented in quick cuts.
- Trivia hosts Shawn and Chuck and contestants speaking on camera from interviews.
- Voiceover by Horgen, who also speaks on camera at the end.

To get to that one-minute product, Pinkley shot about 39 minutes of tape over about 2 hours the night of the event, then spent 4 hours the next day in the editing room. Typically for these pieces, she and Horgen write a script ahead of time. On location they move him around to speak his lines and use a hot light to light him. They do short interviews, and she shoots B-roll. On this night, though, their routine met several challenges. Pinkley stated them this way:

Challenge 1: This happened to fall on a cycle when Tom was also doing his reporting for the print story, which isn’t usually the case. This would limit his time available for moving around the room to read the script on-camera.

Challenge 2: Further limiting his time, the trivia event was 2 hours long, meaning we had to move quickly to do his lines and allow him time to gather info to print. And I only had limited time to capture the essence of the night.

Challenge 3: The bar was small, crowded and dark with limited access to outlets to plug in the hot light. The bar was also noisy with music playing when the trivia questions weren’t being asked over loudspeaker.

So Pinkley and Horgen were dealing with difficulties related to reporting for multiple media platforms and also challenges to quality with both video and audio.

The clash with the needs of print reporting called for some creative adjustment. Pinkley said that for the print story (Horgen, 2010), Horgen needed time to focus on experiencing the event as it was happening and ask questions then or soon afterward without the distraction of tasks for the video story like doing a line on camera. So rather than spending most of the event moving Horgen around the room and lighting shots, they shot only two of his lines on camera, without special lighting, and did the other three lines off-camera with B-roll covering. That way they got through most of the script by about 15 minutes into the event.

Pinkley tackled the video challenges by manipulating several components on her camera (gain settings, shutter speed, iris) throughout the shoot to keep the right amount of light coming into the camera. Those adjustments enabled her to deal with a dark room that was also sprinkled with bright spots because players were writing on white pieces of paper.

For the audio, she used a shotgun, directional microphone to get sound from around the room while she also placed a wireless mic on the main mic stand to capture the hosts interacting with the crowd. As she went around the room, she asked players questions between segments of loud music. The questions she asked would mesh well with the script. Even with the difficult video environment, she had to focus more at times on the audio and just keep the camera rolling so she didn't cut off chatter from the host to the crowd. That left her with more video to edit than usual.

She worked through the editing the next day, but that took twice as long as being at the event. And she had to juggle interruptions because of her other responsibilities.

Pinkley said Horgen and a couple of others who saw the piece liked the way it was paced. She was pleased with the comments she was able to get from participants to help tell the story. The style of shooting and editing for the CW pieces—with jump cuts, quick zooms in and out, and tilted angles—is a sharp contrast with the more subdued, documentary news story style Pinkley was used to. But this is an entertainment piece for a younger audience, so she is working hard to make the most of new conventions.

Beyond the adjustments of style, Pinkley faces broader challenges doing stories that show on television in addition to online. There is less margin for error than on the web alone. "You have to be broadcast ready. You have to be able to troubleshoot problems," she says. The expectation of quality in shooting and editing is also higher.

Pinkley's experience and training have prepared her for her newest work in video storytelling. She has worked at StarTribune.com since it began in the 1990s, starting in a copy-editing position out of journalism school. Along the way she has retrained herself by taking video classes at a technical college, been mentored by an experienced TV photographer, covered years of stories of all kinds using video, trained photographers to gather audio into slideshows, and taken on video training for staffers as well.

Her work on the bar trivia feature shows the level of care it takes to do excellent work. In her view, doing this kind of work well means being able to "balance how much control you have in a situation" and being flexible and creative enough to make needed changes in approach. In editing, she says, it is important to have the courage to abandon something that isn't working. And whatever the story, it is important to recognize that "your job isn't just done when you're done shooting. You have to get into the editing room after you might be tired and really strung out and still make a story out of it."

That kind of commitment to pursue quality, whether the story is a fun entertainment feature or a life-and-death news piece, lines up with what the ethics scholars in this book call virtue. By persevering and being flexible and creative, Pinkley is setting a high standard for online storytelling.

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