

Education Policy Journalism in a New Media Age

To print, or not to print: that is not the whole question ...

As a blogger told Northeastern University's *Huntington News*: "A story breaks tonight at midnight. By 12:10, I can get details on the web. With papers, I have to wait until the next morning when the news is stale."

That sentiment is not surprising in an era when people are busy sending 140 characters max via Twitter, and some are claiming "social networking fatigue."

We asked a few experts to consider the future shape of education policy-related publishing in a blogging/Twittering age, and by association, the future of *THE NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION*.

Prepare for Impact

As media digitizes, the information and experiences become more a reflection of the community than a product delivered to the audience

BRIAN REICH

We all want to have an impact—to fix the problems that exist in our society, to address the seemingly intractable issues that plague our communities or just to feel as if something we are doing is helping to change the world for the better. Lately, we have been looking at how the Internet can support that important work. But the Internet has not helped us realize the kind of change we know is possible—at least not yet. Organizations send millions of emails but they are settling for ridiculously low response rates. People sign petitions online every day with one click of a mouse, but those petitions rarely change minds or impact the outcome of a vote. And groups raise millions of dollars online, but cannot seem to solve the problems they aim to address.

NEBHE and its *NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION* can be different.

NEBHE sends emails, writes blog posts, hosts events, publishes interviews and issues other notices on a daily basis. Increasingly, NEBHE is looking at ways to support this work across dozens of different platforms online, and offline as well. And many of these efforts have been successful—more people are aware of NEBHE's work, have considered ways to contribute their thoughts on the issues and want to participate in the process of making real change that NEBHE is helping to foster. To get to the next level, however, NEBHE and *NEJHE* have

to do more. Raising awareness is important, and it's a necessary step in the process of generating measurable and sustainable impact—but it is not impact in itself. Other steps are needed, and those steps won't happen without some kind of directed action.

How We Got Here

The rise of the Internet and the ubiquity of technology has dramatically changed the way people get and share information and the expectations of what audiences want when it comes to ... well ... everything.

Audiences do not rely on a single source for information. They don't get their news from one place, all read the same books and magazines, watch the same television show day after day, nor even visit the same websites. Technology gives each of us the opportunity to create our own personal connection to something, online and offline. At the same time, the Internet has taught us that we can get everything we want, customized to meet our personal needs or satisfy our particular interests, have it available on demand or delivered in near-real time, all in return for a price we want to pay (which is often very little). Those high expectations apply to everything: retail, nonprofit organizations and charities, politics and government, media and education—whether online or offline.

Because the audience believes it has control over its media experience, anything less than what it views as total value results in disappointment and frustration. Those high expectations play out every single time a user logs on, picks up a paper, sits down in front of a television, buys a product or ventures out to a concert or event. And when you try to create policy or teach

people about a serious issue, the diversity in approaches and opinions only grows.

The shift in behavior means groups must offer as much choice and customization to their audience as possible. Failure to provide compelling information or engaging experiences will result in audiences tuning out. And though technology allows information to be collected or created and then distributed faster and more cost-effectively than ever, more choice does not come easily—particularly when you need to offer a very diverse audience a limited set of information and make it relevant, timely and compelling.

Today, anyone with a blog, cell phone, flip cam or any number of other tools can compete for attention. It is the end of the monopoly of institutional content. In the past, content came from institutions, and audiences were expected to tune in and consume what was available. Today, content comes from both institutions and non-institutions, and audiences recognize the opportunity to learn from a variety of sources. Rather than sit around, they go looking for that information, wherever it is offered. In fact, almost all the growth in the production and distribution of content is in non-institutions—meaning people like us, armed with an Internet connection and an idea. Organizations now face the challenge of competing for attention with anything and everything that is available.

Technology Is Not the Answer

Our tendency is to look to technologies to meet the needs of our audiences. But we must do more than simply log on or build out if we want to have an impact on how people learn and what actions they take. Technology is evolving, audiences continue to shift and the implications of all these massive changes are just beginning to be felt and understood. Technology can be a critical tool in understanding and managing what we do going forward. But technology is just the facilitator of whatever actions are needed. We all have to do more to recognize how quickly everything is changing and what that means to our work. And we all have to do more to embrace change and adapt our behavior accordingly.

How people use technology is more important than what the technology itself provides. You couldn't communicate like we do today without technology, but technology wouldn't have much purpose if we didn't want to communicate. Consider:

- **Blogs have millions of uses.** There is a perception that blogs represent one thing, one format, one type of voice. Nothing could be further from the truth. Every blog is unique. There are individual blogs, community blogs, blogs that just feature pictures and blogs that are updated only by mobile phone. So forget what you've heard or think about blogs. Blogging software has taken online communications out of the hands of the IT experts of the world and placed it in the hands of anyone with an Internet connection. As a result, it has invited you to

have a different kind of conversation with your audience. A blog can help you push information about a specific topic in an ongoing way or drill deep into a specific event. Blogs can give you a consistent voice on an issue or foster a conversation with your audience that helps expand your community and strengthen your argument. Almost anything is possible if the focus and content exist.

- **Your phone is for more than calling.** Not long ago, people didn't have to ask "where are you?" when they called because your phone was most likely in your kitchen, not in your bag or pocket. Now, mobile phones have allowed you to call and receive calls virtually any time or any place. And there is much more this one piece of technology can do. Text messaging is the dominant activity that people do on their mobile phone: 160-character conversations back and forth billions of times over a year. But people also use their phones to check the weather or search for directions, ask questions of lawmakers, create and share content, buy things and donate to causes they support. If there is a need to engage your audience or invite their participation, the mobile phone is one way to meet them halfway.

- **Games are for more than playing.** Video games are incredibly innovative and far-reaching. They are just now beginning to scratch the surface in terms of what you can do to support organizations, tell stories and engage audiences. There are all sorts of games: first-person shooters, casual games, sports and adventure games. There are also serious games and simulations that help people learn about important issues. These games spawn communities online and offline, some for competition, other simply for social interaction. Games have even become part of the curriculum in some schools to help kids learn about health, get exercise or explore complex math and science topics. The implications of games for education policy and discussions about complex topics or serious issues are significant.

- **Everything is social.** Everyone talks about Facebook and Twitter, but there are thousands of niche social networks that are relevant to particular communities. There are social networks for moms, business people, crafters and communities around all different languages and cultures. Amazon.com is one of the most influential social networks in the world because its developers figured out before anyone else that customers were more likely to buy a book that everyone said was good than a book that everyone said was terrible, and they institutionalized rating systems and comment areas to help convey those opinions. That same concept has been applied to everything from stocks to medical choices to the delivery of individual grants to schoolteachers. All this is driven by social interaction, networking and the power of people communicating with each other—facilitated by technology and the web. And all of it is reputation-driven, meaning what friends and community say is what's most important.

These are just a few of the examples of how different channels and tools can be viewed more broadly. Don't be afraid. Be excited. The organizations that will succeed are those who have relevant, timely and compelling content. Education institutions have always had that content—it's a matter of adapting the delivery to meet the needs and expectations of the audience, be they fellow educators, students, policymakers or other media.

As media digitizes, fragments and moves closer to the audience, the information and experiences become more a reflection of the community than a product delivered to the audience. The very nature of how we get and share information and experience things has changed, so naturally the individuals and organizations who create, consume and share that media need to change as well.

Putting Theory Into Practice

Before any content is created, it's important to understand how your audience uses technology to get and share information. How people create, consume and share information is what defines the media experience for the individual. With the monopoly on content broken, there is simply more information available for audiences to consume than hours in which to consume it, so there will be more than enough options from which to choose.

NEJHE's role should be less about covering what is available to all and instead focus on helping prioritize stories and issues that only a handful of people realize are important, but whose impact is greatest or will be felt by most. Audiences want the privilege of deciding for themselves what information is relevant, how they feel or what they care most about. At the same time, because we can quickly become overwhelmed by the number of choices that are available to us, even the most committed individuals need help interpreting the volumes of information they are exposed to.

Many in the media believe that distilling information down will allow them to please a larger audience. But in practice, the media too often go to the extreme: Either they focus too narrowly and the content fails to interest the audience at all or they over-generalize and are unable to demonstrate a unique value to their audience. *NEJHE* should be careful not to make that same mistake. The challenge is to meet the audience's interests. For policy journals like *NEJHE*, that means exploring issues that other media won't consider or in ways that other media can't devote sufficient time and space to. Embrace the opportunity to tell a unique or important story, resist the urge to please everyone and make sure every piece of content you create is must-read. If you do, not only will the smaller audience that cares most about your issues spend more time and show greater interest in what you provide, the likelihood they will help to share and introduce your content to a larger universe will grow.

How? There is no system or model that will work for everyone, but there are some key considerations that will help you create that must-read content on a regular basis.

- **Build community.** The notion of bringing people with shared interests together has been at the heart of the Internet since its early days and "community" has become a necessary element for any successful online venture. No single entity is able to control, create or know everything, so community allows you to "co-create." Community allows us to consider more stories, more issues, more voices and gain more access to information around the globe. Still, inviting the community to contribute content and perspective does not mean ceding control to the mob, as many media companies have done by providing blogs or feeds to their audience with no significant filtering. Don't open the floodgates and let anyone post: review the submissions and ensure that the conversation remains focused and the contributions constructive. Support your audience by asking questions, providing feedback and guidance to help them get the most out of the discussion. Don't forget to reward people whose submissions enhance the discussion by promoting and calling attention to their views, and know that you can remove people from a conversation if they cross a line. Real value will come from providing people with the ability to interact with one another, and channelling their support toward creating more and better content.

- **Support "aggregation."** With so many sources of news and other information, aggregation allows us to bring the best related content into one place and set up users to have a more complete understanding of something they care about. Fueled by technology, we'll have the ability to learn or discuss whatever we believe is relevant—any time, any place with a more diverse (and deeply invested) audience and through any device. And the closer readers are to a story or event, the more they want to know about it and the less overloaded they'll feel. Still, aggregation requires more than just good technology. You must both embrace the idea of collecting content from various sources—many of which you don't control or even contribute to—and help guide the process so the result is useful to the audience.

- **Be a steward.** Beyond culling good content is the commitment to invest in growing the relationship with each person in your audience. The possibility exists to treat every member of the audience like they are valuable and provide them with the flexibility and control to find value in what you offer. If you take care of the relationship with your audience, loyalty and commitments increase and revenue will follow. Put another way, tending to the relationship makes your audience want to buy, become members or show their support.

Content has always been central to the success of media outlets. In the digital age, the basic need for more and better content must be addressed. You have to be "must-read" in all aspects of what you do: the delivery of information (is it updated regularly?), the creation of experiences (is your offering evolving as the audience provides feedback and guidance?) and more. There are so many opportunities for your audience to look else-

where to have their questions answered or their needs met. Perhaps even more than being able to demonstrate expertise or quality service at the start, media outlets must ensure that the information and experiences they deliver are relevant and timely always.

Three Ideas

- **Tell me what I must read.** Help your audience find the information—newspaper and magazine articles, research reports, blog posts and more—that they must read and understand if they want to participate in your work. Do the reading for them, then use your site/blog to summarize and offer the important context to those readings your audience wants and needs.

- **Facilitate discussions.** So much of our media today comes in bits and pieces. In those formats, it's difficult to understand an issue in depth or learn what motivates people to pursue certain lines of thinking. *NEJHE* should facilitate discussions about issues with key voices and representatives of different perspectives. Those conversations should be given the time and attention that the complex subjects that inspire them deserve. Identify a few smart people, spark a conversation, record it and consider distributing it via podcast.

A podcast allows you to have a longer conversation—it's tough to read thousands of words online, but people have shown a willingness to listen to good discussion for extended periods of time.

- **Give a listening tour.** A common activity online today is to ask for comments—to post an article and expect the audience to find it, read it and have thoughts they want to share. In reality, that is too much effort, and the likelihood that audiences will take time to comment in large numbers is proving to be increasingly low. So make listening a priority—create online and in-person listening opportunities. Have your audience—including policymakers, teachers, students, parents, researchers, the media and others—talk about their interests and perspectives. Record and share those stories and ideas, their concerns and opinions. Not only will it serve as good content on its own, it will provide you with a rich outline of the topics and areas of interest that your audience expects you to cover.

Brian Reich recently created a new venture called "little m media" borrowing from his 2007 book, *Media Rules! Mastering Today's Technology to Connect With and Keep Your Audience*. Email: brian@littlemmedia.com

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