Practice and Promise

Web Journalism

of a New Medium

James Glen Stovall

WEB JOURNALISM

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stovall, James Glen.
Web journalism : practice and promise of a new medium / James Glen Stovall.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-205-35398-3
1. Electronic journals. 2. Journalism. I. Title.

PN4833.S76 2004
070.4—dc21

2003048084

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 08 07 06 05 04 03

This book is dedicated to the student staff members of Dateline Alabama, the news web site of the College of Communication and Information Sciences at the University of Alabama, who allowed me to believe that I was teaching them about web journalism when it was really the other way around.

PREFACE

One morning during the spring of 2002, when I was writing this book, I did the following things in my study at home:

- Checked Dateline Alabama, the news web site for which I am the faculty adviser at the College of Communication and Information Sciences at the University of Alabama
- Checked my email through a web site account that picks up mail from several servers
- Sent out various emails
- Talked on the phone
- Got news from several favorite web sites
- Made notes (handwritten) for this book, and in the process checked several relevant web sites
- Read the newspaper
- Downloaded (legally) some audio files from a commercial dealer with whom I have an account, and burned a CD
- Called a university number and checked the messages on my office phone
- Listened to music on the radio
- Thought about the opening of baseball season and remembered that I needed to renew my audio account (for a fee) with Major League Baseball, so that I could listen to radio broadcasts of the games throughout the summer
- Listened to music on an Internet radio station

All of this behavior is both typical and idiosyncratic media behavior. Each of us has a way of reading through a newspaper or flipping through television channels that is our own. We do these things in combination with other activities in our lives, but the combinations are ours alone.

To write about the Internet and the World Wide Web in the early twenty-first century may be a dangerous act. Fifteen years ago, the Web did not exist. Five years ago, it was far different from what it had become in the middle of 2002.

Some currently argue that the Web has approached a plateau and that the innovation that has occurred along with its explosive growth will give way to development of existing ideas and concepts. The dot-com crash of 2001–2002 has put the brakes on many new ideas, and while we continue to see the number of sites and the amount of usage grow, what we are actually seeing and doing on the Web will be what we see and do for a long time to come.

Maybe.

However, in one area of the Web—web journalism—we are just beginning to explore the possibilities that this medium offers. To this point, most journalists have

simply transferred their content, practices, and look to the Web, without giving much thought to the medium itself.

Many in the traditional media have resisted doing even that. Newspaper publishers and television station managers refused to establish web sites until they were compelled to do so by the fact that "everyone else had done it." They have viewed the Web as ephemeral, scary, or profitless—or all three. They have continued to invest in stronger signal towers or new printing presses without thinking much about the idea that a new generation of consumers will prefer to get their news without the aid of trees and delivery trucks.

Media traditionalists have recited several mantras to convince themselves that they can finish their careers without having to deal with the Web or its implications:

"I like to hold a newspaper in my hands. I like the feel of it. You can't get that with a computer."

"You can't take the computer to the bathroom with you."

"No one ever made any money on the Web."

Today, of course, a notebook computer is easier to hold than a newspaper (and in some cases it's lighter). It can certainly be carried into the bathroom, and with a wireless Internet connection, you can read your local newspaper or the *New York Times Book Review* there, at the breakfast table, or in the stadium between innings at a baseball game.

And, today, billions of dollars in business is being transacted over the Web. The people making these transactions are not doing it as a hobby. Somebody, somewhere, is making money.

The Web is a scary thing to many journalists. It offers the prospect that not only will journalism practices change, but also that the basic journalist–audience equation may shift. What we know about the Web at this point seems to portend that readers and viewers will be more active in journalistic decision making and presentation.

This book has been written to explore the changes that are taking place in the journalist world because of the Web. My hope is that together we—students, teachers, and professionals—will better understand them. My goal is to get us to think about what we are doing and how the medium is changing our practices and attitudes.

Unlike some of my colleagues and friends in the academy and the profession, I do not view our Web future with trepidation. I believe it offers journalists extraordinary new opportunities to tell their stories and communicate with their audiences. In these first years of the medium, imagination and creativity—coupled with a thorough grounding of the basic practices and culture of journalism—will be at a premium. Those who exercise these qualities will have a profound effect on their profession. If this book sparks an idea here or there, it will be a success.

All efforts like the writing of this book are the products of many people, and this one is no different. My colleagues, particularly Ed Mullins, Matt Bunker, Bailey Thomson, and Kim Bissell, were invaluable to me as I bounced ideas, one after another, off them.

Amelia Parker, a Dateline Alabama veteran and the author of the chapter of legal issues (Chapter 12), deserves special thanks not only for the chapter but for other help she gave to me in putting this book together.

Web journalists around the country were generous with their time and ideas, particularly the people at MSNBC.com in Redmond, Washington, where I spent two days researching this book. I am especially grateful to Tom Brew, the executive editor, Angela Clark, Meredith Burkitt, Jonathan Dube, and many others who let me look in on their professional lives.

I would also like to thank the following reviewers for their helpful comments: Mindy McAdams, University of Florida, and Ron Roat, University of Southern Indiana.

My wife Sally and son Jefferson have now suffered through yet another book manuscript, and as usual, their support and encouragement literally made this book possible.

This book is dedicated to the students who have worked with me for three years on Dateline Alabama, the news web site of the College of Communication and Information Sciences at the University of Alabama. Their support, ideas, and enthusiasm inspired this effort.

J.G.S.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

LOGGING ON TO THE WEB

MAJOR THEMES

- The World Wide Web is a news medium in the sense that all web sites need to post new information to keep visitors coming back.
- As a news medium, the Web is neither print nor broadcast; it contains characteristics of both, but it is quite different from either when considered on its own.
- The Web is destined to change journalism, particularly in its news-gathering and presentation functions.
- The most profound change the Web offers to journalism is its quality of interactivity and the possibility of changing the relationship between the journalist and the audience.

■ Slate.com sprang forth onto the World Wide Web in 1996 as Microsoft's hip, cheeky contribution to web journalism. Six years later the web magazine (webzine, e-zine) was still hip and cheeky, although a little chastened by its brief and unsuccessful life as a subscription publication in a world of free content. Rather than just writing about the bankruptcy of Enron and the subsequent fallout, Slate developed the Enron Blame Game in February 2002, shortly after Enron's bankruptcy had been announced. The "game" consisted of a graphic that looked like a game board with pictures and icons. A reader could click on any part of the board and find out whom that person was blaming for the bankruptcy or what was being blamed for it. Despite its journalism-with-attitude demeanor, the graphic contained a lot of information and made the point that no one really knew very much about why Enron had failed. (http://slate.msn.com/?id=2061470)

■ Glenn Reynolds, an energetic University of Tennessee law professor, has established a weblog (a web site that allows him to post his opinions and to accept and post entries from others—see Chapter 2) called Instapundit (www.instapundit.com). He updates this site with his opinions and information throughout the day. The writing is short, lively, and provocative. His entries and the ones from others that he posts contain lots of links that take readers to other sites. Reynolds (as of April 2003, about

two years after the site began) averages 90,000 visitors a day—more than the daily circulation of most newspapers in the United States.

■ On the evening of September 11, 2001, a college student in Florida had not heard from friends in New York. Unable to do much else, she stayed up until early the next morning teaching herself Flash and building a tribute to the victims of the attacks. She took images from a number of news and commercial web sites, including ABCNews.com, and downloaded Ray Charles's version of "America the Beautiful." She posted the presentation on her web site, emailed a few friends, and went to bed. Within a few days, the site received 93,000 hits in a single day. During the month of September, she had 2.6 million visitors. (http://doubtlessdesigns.net/godblessamerica.html)

■ As President George W. Bush prepared for the State of the Union speech in January 2002, the *Christian Science Monitor* web site editors thought it would be a good idea to give their readers a shot at writing their own State of the Union address. They set up an interactive section called "My Fellow Americans," which let readers select ideas and phrases they would include in the speech. The section also gave readers information about what makes a good speech and had a discussion forum where readers could post their own speech or discuss Bush's speech. (www.csmonitor.com/specials/myFellowAmericans/greatessay.html)

■ MSNBC.com did not just tell its readers about the new strike zone that Major League Baseball was demanding its umpires follow. The site set up an interactive presentation that showed readers the effects of the new zone compared to the old one (see Figure 1.1) (www.msnbc.com/modules/ifront/default.asp?0ql=cmp)

What is all this? Journalism? Some of it is, some of it isn't—at least not journalism in the traditional sense. Just what is journalism on the Web? That may be the biggest question that journalism itself will have to answer in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The examples above (and hundreds of thousands of others) occurred because the World Wide Web exists. They could not have happened, for technical or cultural reasons, in the traditional media of newspapers, magazines, and television and radio broadcasting. And just over a decade ago, the Web didn't exist.

WHAT IS THE WORLD WIDE WEB?

The development of the World Wide Web had little to do with journalism, but a lot to do with news and information. Two threads of creativity and problem solving—each as old as human intelligence—merged in the early 1990s to form the World Wide Web. Each thread had a tradition, a set of important personalities and contributors, and an approach. Each thread intersected and intertwined itself through the other in ways that ultimately helped to develop the communication system we have today.

One thread was what we might call literary-scientific. The basic "problem" was the volume of human knowledge. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a

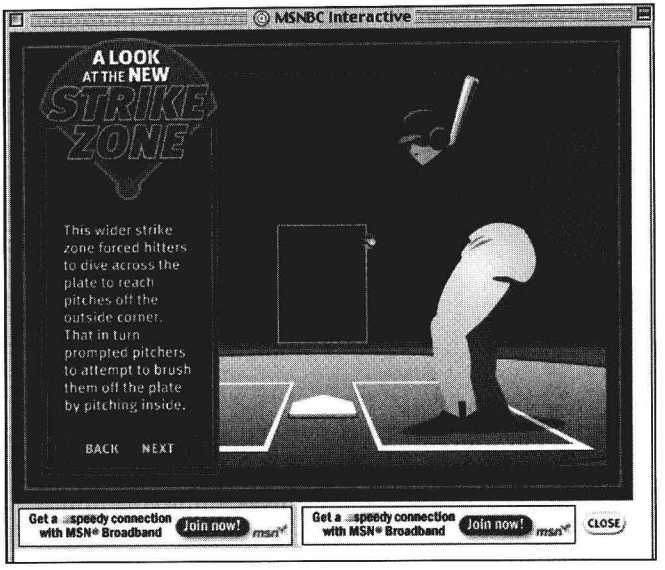

FIGURE 1.1 MSNBC Strike Zone Interactive. When Major League Baseball told umpires to change the strike zone to speed up the game, MSNBC.com developed an interactive presentation that allowed users to compare the old strike zone to the new one. It even let them throw a few pitches.

vast expansion of knowledge (information, ideas, technology), much of it wrought from a desire to win in warfare. At the end of World War II, Vannevar Bush, a scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, published a seminal article in the *Atlantic Monthly* on this problem.

> There is a growing mountain of research. But there is increased evidence that we are being bogged down today as specialization extends. The investigator is staggered by the findings and conclusions of thousands of other workers—conclusions which he cannot find time to grasp, much less to remember, as they appear. (Bush, 1945)

Bush thought that photography and compression might be the answer—taking pictures of documents and then reducing them so that a set of encyclopedia volumes could fit into a match box. The cards on which these pictures would reside (microfiche) could then be read on some machine that would help the scientist to remember the associations and threads of thinking. Bush's solution to the problem had some validity for a while, but it was his articulation of the problem itself and his ideas about sharing and linking that became important.

What Vannevar Bush was beginning to envision was *hypertext,* a name later coined by Ted Nelson. In the 1960s Nelson conceived of a universe of documents, called a "docuverse," in which documents would exist and be shared for a small fee. He called