New narratives for the digital age (Polis Summer School guest blog) #PolisSS

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Is the future of newspaper narrative?

The New York Times' interactive feature article Snow fall has won all the accolades but it's just one of the many new ways that this very traditional newspaper is reinventing story-telling. Polis Summer School student Billy Ostermeyer reports on a talk by Digital Strategy Editor Aron Pilhofer (@pilhofer).

The New York Times' Pulitzer prize winning piece "Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek," is a 17,000 word article about the stories of skiers trapped in a fatal avalanche. As Pilhofer scrolls through the article, he stops about half way down the first page, past a flyover graphic in the article of the canyon where the avalanche took place, and points out a quick video of a skier:
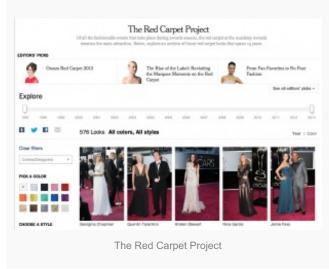
> *"Everyone else loves that flyover, but my favourite part of this article is the skier. The movement at the shot shows you that this is a different experience. Video on a news sight is hard to get people to watch. They're usually stacked up off to the side, and they're kind of secondary. But this video, embedded right in the middle of the article, signals to the reader that this is important stuff."*

Pilhofer is the Associate Editor for Digital Management Strategies at the New York Times. The very existence of his position is a result of the struggle in traditional newsrooms across the world to redefine what journalism is in terms of formatting and presentation in an era where the 18-24 demographic gets the majority of its news delivered directly to them via social media instead of having to actively seek it out.

He and his team work on projects that range from deciding how to maximize the number of readers on a story, to developing new methods of integrating multi-media into website articles, to understanding how frequently and for what purposes readers use multimedia tools on the site.

Pilhofer is convinced that the first-rate journalism which the New York Times provides will not survive in a new generation of users unaccustomed and bored with the passive readership of traditional, made-of-paper newspapers. To survive and flourish, papers must adapt an ethos of efficiency, aesthetic pleasure, and interactivity in a digital medium in a way that has been used for years by social media, marketing, computing and other digital powerhouses (a la Google, Apple, Facebook, BuzzFeed, etc).

To elaborate on this, he pulls up a slideshow database his team worked on about red carpet fashion at the Oscars going back to 1997 ("Not the hardest hitting story we've ever done…"), and then pulls up a blog done by one of his colleagues, who has used a software program to track which features on that database people most frequently use. He goes on to explain that the design is not random, and that the page is designed to guide users around in the massive sea of data (a series of "Editor's Picks" sit above the slideshow) but also to allow users to dive in if they so

choose:

"But when we first put this stuff up we don't know if or how people use it."

The Red Carpet Project

However, by tracking how people use the site, Pilhofer and his team can get an idea of how the database can be improved and, furthermore, how future interactive media can be improved, by understanding exactly what it is that people use and don't use.

Not surprisingly, the data show that people prefer to keep things simple and efficient: one of the infographics detailing the findings shows that just 5% of all users actually clicked through individual slides, that the features in heaviest use were the efficiency-maximizing editor's picks and the share option (demonstrating to the team that the feature has been fairly well received), and that people who used only the slides tended not to stay on the page as long as people who used the other tools to improve their experience.

There's a wide spectrum of technology that Pilhofer can use to track this sort of thing ("NSA level stuff" he says somewhat giddily), but as he works through the data for the class, it becomes clear that, while Pilhofer's work is statistically driven, he can also think critically, use empirically gathered data to understand his audience, and think within a paradigm of empathy and accessibility.

Pilhofer accepts that despite the massive commitment at the Times to new ways of working there is still some minor cultural resistance to change:

> *"My bosses would be horrified to hear this but when we put out 'Snow Fall,' everyone thought we were brilliant for launching it on Twitter. But from every perspective – financially, journalistically, or otherwise – it's just common sense that we would use techniques like audience segmentation. But it's tricky, because when I pitch that concept to the editors, I have to frame it a bit differently."*

Despite winning the Pulitzer, "Snow Fall" has come under no shortage of criticism: some call it gimmicky, many note that the *New York Times* is a bit late to the game in this approach to digital media and that it was too expensive to be used often. Others question just how many people actually read it all. But there are plenty of other new narrative techniques being deployed at the Times such as such as Nate Silver's statistically-driven Five Thirty Eight political blog, right through to the automated Haiku's made up of sentences from that day's edition.

Pilhofer fervently believes that Snow Fall represents a positive shift in the way the old news media giants now perceive digital content. Even on a digital platform, it goes without saying that journalism is still about sources and quality reporting, the bread and butter of an organization like the *New York Times*. The next step now, he concludes, is to take it further. "We should be doing a lot more Snow Fall-like things, and I do think there are ways to do it at scale."

The blog by Polis Summer School student Billy Ostermeyer

38 Degrees Blog