

The Role of the Storyteller

It's one day after the death of Michael Jackson, June 25th, 2009. All across the country, newsrooms have expended the level of resources once reserved for covering political conventions, presidential elections, and the passing of heads of state. In our burgeoning celebrity-first culture, that part is not surprising. What is remarkable is the path the story takes, not through any one news medium, but across many: newspapers, radio, television, the Internet, and social media.

The first contact with the story of Michael Jackson's death was, for many, through social media followed by the web, then radio and television, and, finally, newspapers – and by extension, other print media, such as magazines. Within an hour of the pop icon's death, the message was being received and relayed by people with cell phones, Facebook or MySpace pages, and Twitter accounts. For the current generation, there will always be the memory of where they were when they got the news that Jackson had died; in many ways, it is similar to those of another generation who will never forget the details surrounding how they learned of the death of President John F. Kennedy over four decades earlier.

For the news media, the difference was palatable. It wasn't so long ago that when a major news story broke, the path to an audience was first and foremost through a traditional medium: print, radio, or television; then and only then would thought be given to posting it for the web, and social media weren't even on the horizon. Now it's web first. Just ask Mark Douglas of Tampa's WFLA-TV. Douglas, a 30-year veteran of television news, would think television first. Not any more. "I sometimes joke that I'm a web reporter who every once in a while does television," he says. In fact, a 2010 story Douglas wrote about a regional coyote infestation "broke" first on the station's web site and didn't end up on its TV newscast in a different form until weeks later.

His parent company, Media General Corporation, also owns the *Tampa Tribune*, WFLA radio, and the news web site tbo.com. Their "converged newsroom" concept dates back to the 1990s when theirs was one of the first newsrooms in the country to adopt a multiplatform approach to newsgathering and storytelling. It is illustrative of the very different

demands placed upon journalists today. In a word, these demands can be summed up as “multimedia.”

What is Multimedia?

First and foremost, it’s an approach to storytelling that bestows new power, both on the storyteller and the audience. Control over the elements of a big story is no longer the exclusive domain of the print reporter, the broadcaster, or even the web journalist. It’s the domain of the storyteller, the person whose skills and judgment contribute to a story that has maximum impact both for and with the audience. We call that level of storytelling *Power Performance*, because it harnesses the power of today’s multimedia to tell the story in a more compelling way. It involves every aspect of the storytelling process, from print to broadcast to web. It invites the audience to be part of the process by including them through all forms of social media. There is much misunderstanding about the role of multimedia. Is it just applying new technology to old skills? Or is it an entirely new form of storytelling that requires a whole new set of skills? In many ways, that discussion is framed by the rapid development of online media compared to the adoption rate of traditional media. The Internet is unique for its exponential growth over an incredibly fast period of time.

Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in the mid-1400s, but cost and distribution meant it was hundreds of years before books were adopted by a significant segment of the world’s population. Compare that to the growth of television, which we think of as having always been part of our media experience. It took over three decades to reach just half of the American public. By contrast, it took the Internet ten years to reach the same audience level. As for social media, five years after its inception in 2003, Facebook alone had reached 350 million people. In 2011, that figure rose to half a billion. As author and media watcher Ken Auletta puts it, “That’s extraordinary.”

With the tools available to us, it’s useful to distinguish what is expected of us as storytellers in today’s multimedia environment. In doing so, let’s summarize what separates best practices in multimedia storytelling – *Power Performance* – from those approaches that neither advance the story nor the storyteller.

POWER PERFORMANCE IN MULTIMEDIA IS:

- Recognizing the major elements of any story, regardless of media platform.
- Approaching storytelling across every media platform available (print, audio, video, web).
- Learning from the best practices in each medium by taking advantage of the unique elements of each.
- Becoming proficient with the tools of each medium.
- Thinking visually about each element of the story, including your own place in it.
- Using all means available to interact with and engage the audience in the process of storytelling.

POWER PERFORMANCE IN MULTIMEDIA IS NOT:

- Creating a story simply to accommodate the technology available.
- Cutting and pasting a story from another medium onto the web.
- Creating stories quickly and without much forethought.
- Having only a rudimentary knowledge of each medium's strengths.
- Ignoring opportunities for interaction with the audience, who often possess defining elements of the story.

Keep these points in mind as you begin to consider why it is important to become proficient in the performance elements of multimedia; some might say it's as important as being well versed in the nuts and bolts of basic journalism. Both have elements in common: solid writing, good storytelling, and credible research. Multimedia is, in many ways, a combination of the *enduring values* of good journalism and the modern visual tools available to deliver a more compelling story.

The oldest form of news writing has always been traditional print or newspaper reporting. While the influence of newspapers on other forms of media has been greatly diminished, early broadcast journalists took their lead from the local newspaper. Why? Not only because it was easy to do, but also because newspaper reporters generally spent time researching a story before writing it. Your venture into writing for other media in today's newsrooms should, similarly, take time. As a general precept, keep in mind this paraphrase from a popular wine commercial of the past, "No story should be written before its time."

In fact, for generations of journalists, the distinction between time spent on a story and the depth achieved in that story defined the qualitative difference between print and broadcast reporters. Newspapers were often defined by their appeal to the cerebral side of human beings and broadcast (TV especially) to the visceral side of our nature. What, then, of the Internet? Does it engage both our brains (cerebral) and our emotions (visceral)?

The web, with its multimedia potential, is the biggest change in the way people read and absorb information since Gutenberg invented the printing press. It is, as Eastman and Ferguson write, the primary example of "discontinuous change," meaning it is unlike any change in media that predates it. While it's "like" a newspaper, radio, and television, it's none of the above, nor is it a simple combination of all of the above. It is an entirely new medium that exists, but doesn't eclipse those media that came before it. In the best sense, it is the repository medium for most of what we think of as multimedia. As such, it has defined and redefined many of the traditional roles we think of in journalism, all of which, thus far, have been derived from what we often describe as "old" media.

Newspapers and Broadcast News

There are both similarities and differences between today's so-called "converged" newsrooms, driven as they are by multimedia demands on reporters, and the manner in which

the relationship between newspapers, radio and television developed in and around each other. To start with, those who owned newspapers found radio stations to be both competitors and allies. Fearing competition, newspaper owners intimidated the Associated Press into embargoing its news to radio stations until after 9 a.m. (when presumably everyone had already read the morning paper) and 9 p.m. (when they had already read the afternoon paper). This led radio stations to hire and develop their own news staffs, ultimately benefiting the station and the public.

Over time, newspaper owners came to see the promotional value of owning radio stations. Radio was a great way to give listeners some of the story and refer them to the parent company's newspaper for the rest. Does this sound familiar? Today, newspapers use television to drive readers to their print product, while both use the web to entice the online audience. However, the staff for each medium – print and broadcast – were once separate and reporters had specific, defined duties related to the medium in which they worked. And, while they shared the same parent company, equality did not exist. The newspaper was primary; radio (and later television) was there to serve the paper's best interests – and profits.

Of course, all of this began to change once radio started to garner the lion's share of the company's profits; it certainly changed once television became its profit center. Still, a "wall" of sorts existed between the print side of the news operation and its broadcast "second cousin." Big stories were routinely withheld from the nightly newscast until after they first reached readers the following morning. Until the 1980s, broadcast news operations were often seen by a newspaper's executives as a necessary evil – albeit a profitable one – but certainly media that should be avoided by the newspaper's "real" journalists, lest they be tainted by broadcasting's supposed superficiality and personalities.

Similarly, established radio newsmen shunned television in its early days; those who emerged as TV news stars were those willing to give the new medium a try. More recently, some television news managers have held back exclusive stories for the next scheduled newscast instead of allowing themselves to be "scooped" by their own web sites. Each established medium was reluctant to accept the presence of a new technology.

One example is WEAN, in the 1980s, an all-news radio station in Providence, RI, then owned by the *Providence Journal-Bulletin* corporation. Each afternoon a printed copy of the top stories to run in the following morning's *Journal* would be delivered to the radio newsroom, which existed in rented space several streets away from the spacious newspaper facilities to prevent cross-contamination. Today, that information in, say the *Tampa Tribune's* newsroom, would be used to coordinate multimedia coverage across all the company's platforms. In 1985, it was for informational purposes only. The radio news staff was forbidden to develop or air any of the stories the newspaper staff was developing until the following day, well after they had been published and read by the paper's audience. It's difficult to absorb in today's multimedia-rich environment, but print reporters had their place and so did broadcast reporters, but they were in two different – and disconnected – worlds, sharing only the name of the corporation that owned them. How times have changed!

Today's print reporter

Those who have spent most of their lives in a print newsroom are often nostalgic about the days of "ink-stained fingers," synonymous with a time when newspapers were the

premier medium and led the way for other news media to follow. It seems a better time, when everyone knew the tools associated with their job and security came from honing the use of those tools into a sharply defined set of skills. Jenny Cromie spent six years as a reporter at the *Anniston Star* and writes about the often difficult transition from print reporting to multimedia journalism:

It was a time when most people still took the Sunday paper. Computer-assisted reporting was just coming into vogue. And long, in-depth story features still had not met the short attention spans of online readers. Good old-fashioned print journalism still prevailed. And if you had a big story package in the Sunday paper, you could stay late in the newsroom, listen to the kerthunk, kerthunk, kerthunk of the press running in the background, and grab the first few copies of your above-the-fold story – barely dry ink and all. It was a great time to be a reporter.

Her reminiscences bring with them this reality check: the timeframe in which she worked as a print journalist wasn't the 1940s, 1950s, or even the 1960s or 1970s. It was in the mid to late 1990s. It's a strong reminder of how quickly the job of traditional print reporter has changed – and how those occupying what were once essentially newspaper jobs have had to change and, more importantly, *adapt*. In order to be successful, today's print reporter must be not only a wordsmith, but a visual thinker across all media. He or she must become proficient with a digital still photo camera and small hand-held video camera, as well as develop an understanding of graphics, slideshows, streaming audio and video: the major elements of reporting for the web.

A typical day for today's print reporter might look something like this timeline. The assignment: cover a breaking news story centered on a chemical plant explosion just outside the downtown of a major metropolitan area.

- 6:40 a.m. Arrive on scene. Take several quick “snaps” with your digital camera. Interface camera with laptop or cell phone to send photos back to the newsroom for posting on the web.
- 7:00 a.m. Interview fire chief and eyewitnesses using digital audio recorder or small video cam, preferably the latter, since it captures both image and sound – the sound can later be extracted for radio and the web; the video for the web and television.
- 7:10 a.m. Using basic facts gleaned from the interviews, file a quick story for the web. Continue to gather facts and interviews.
- 7:45 a.m. File second story, with updated information, maybe a few new photos, audio or video. Think about elements for TV story. If the only reporter from that news organization, he/she may do a “live shot” for the co-owned or partner television or cable outlet.
- 8:20 a.m. Collaborate from the field with web editor to determine best way to present larger-scale package on the story, using not only the elements gathered in the field, but graphics, slideshows, history of the plant, identify former workers to provide perspective, either through profiles/sidebars or for audio interviews and/or podcasts.
- 9:15 a.m. Begin to think about the broader, detailed story for the next edition of the newspaper.

Notice that it is over an hour and a half before the “print” reporter begins to think at all about her/his newspaper story. During that time, he/she is doing jobs formerly reserved for colleagues in radio and television news. And we haven’t even begun to include the additional possibilities, such as shooting, producing and presenting a video story for the next morning’s television newscast. It might include narration and a “standup,” in which the storyteller appears on camera. There is increasing pressure to put the finished package into a form that will be posted on someone’s mobile phone or other device. And when all that’s done, the reporter must be sure the story goes out to the newspaper’s followers on social media, and find time to post her/his thoughts and observations on covering the story via the news organization’s web site or on a reporter’s blog.

Under these circumstances, is it accurate or fair to describe what you’ve just read as the domain of the “newspaper” reporter? Probably not. Multimedia storyteller is a better term for the actual work being done. This is not to suggest that in every instance the newspaper reporter is always on her or his own to cover a story across all media, only that the probability exists, together with the need to be ready if called upon to do so.

Print reporters who once dismissed broadcast media as “superficial” now must embrace the same skills used by TV journalists in order to be successful. That requires a major shift in approach, a new level of skills, and a very different mindset. But, as with most things, history reveals that what appears to be new really has its roots in some incremental changes made in the way news organizations operate and, more importantly, *collaborate* – both within and outside corporate boundaries.

Storytelling collaborations

One early example of a newspaper staff collaborating with a television news staff came in 1994, when Philadelphia’s WPHL-TV launched an innovative newscast together with the then Knight-Ridder-owned *Philadelphia Inquirer* newspaper. Titled *Inquirer News Tonight*, what was then referred to as a “hybrid” newscast (today’s equivalent of “converged”), it incorporated *Inquirer* staffers – print reporters – contributing the stories they were doing for next day’s newspaper. Considered an “experiment,” one that raised tension levels in both newsrooms, it survived only two years. Its legacy, however, was to pioneer the television skills newspaper reporters would need in the future, once newspapers and television stations were not cooperative, but co-owned.

Suddenly, the previously anonymous writers from the newspaper side of journalism had to learn what their counterparts knew intuitively: not only how to write a story in fewer words, but how to present that story using the visual skills of the television journalist. First, there were the on-camera skills, both verbal and non-verbal. Where and how to look into the camera when addressing the viewer was a challenge for the print reporters, as was body positioning, gestures, makeup, hair, clothing, and accessories. Suddenly, people who thought of themselves as writers were forced into recognizing a new dimension to their storytelling for a very different audience. And because it was television, not the printed page, visuals were important. In many ways, albeit on a very limited basis, those *Inquirer* reporters were indulging in multimedia reporting.

Other news operations were watching, including the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, which owned both newspapers and television stations and, up until 1987, had owned WPHL. The idea of sharing resources and combining staffs was appealing, if not primarily from a journalistic standpoint, then from an economic one. In 1995, a reporter named Jim Hummel was in his thirteenth year on the print side of journalism. He pitched an idea to his then-bosses at the *Journal* for a story on trading places with a broadcast reporter. The broadcast reporter would learn the skills needed in a print newsroom and vice versa. Admittedly, the idea was a gimmick, seized upon by the management of television station WLNE to create curiosity and boost viewership during a ratings period. The unpredictable happened, however. Hummel, once he learned the ropes of television news, found he preferred the visual medium and remained at the television station.

More recently, in St. Louis, former newspaper reporters have nicely meshed into news operations at public TV station KETC. Part of the motivation in St. Louis is simple survival. That city's *Post-Dispatch* downsized its reporting staff, resulting in 14 reporters looking for work. They found it, not in another newspaper city room, but in a corner of the TV newsroom at KETC, where they publish their own newspaper as the *St. Louis Beacon* online (www.stlbeacon.org).

Similarly in 2009, KCTS-TV in Seattle brought on board 20 journalists laid off from the *Post-Intelligencer*, absorbing them into its web operation. KCTS president Moss Bresnahan said there were strengths the print reporters brought to his news operation. "We were doing some strategic planning at the station, looking at what public media will become, and that coincided with the closing of the paper," Bresnahan said. "We called some of our contacts at the *P-I* and started actively exploring how to find a viable business model to support an in-depth, integrated multimedia site."

Part of that business model, as we shall see, comes from the integration of print journalism with television and the web. For today's print reporter, that means learning the visual skills long associated with TV news and now a major element of web news. It also means becoming proficient at many of the same skills that today's TV journalist needs to learn, especially those that involve doing more with less, creating opportunities to become valuable players on the landscape of multimedia. It's still journalism, but it's less about medium than message, a form of storytelling that stresses interactivity over authority. And it shares control over the story with the reader, viewer, and user. While embracing the enduring values of journalism – accuracy, objectivity, fairness, and balance – today's print reporter has had to add another dimension to her/his work: *versatility*.

Today's television reporter

Television has traditionally been divided into small, medium, and large markets, as defined by a locale's population size and demographics and as established by Nielsen Media Research of Oldsmar, Florida. The designation has, in many ways, dictated the resources allocated for broadcast news according to market size. In large television markets, reporters do just that: report. They cover their stories, doing interviews, stand-ups, record the narration and sometimes introduce their stories as part of what has

become known in TV news as a “live shot” or “set piece,” where the reporter is on the news set with the anchor for purposes of interaction through a question and answer exchange.

Traditionally, in large markets (sometimes referred to as “major” markets), reporters had a “crew” which included a videographer (updated since the days when film was used for TV news and the term was photographer) who shot the visuals for the story, a field producer, who helped decide the locations to shoot and the subjects to interview, as well as consulting on the story’s writing, and an editor, who put the whole prerecorded “package” together, wedding video to narration and sound bites. The reporter might suggest or look in on these processes, but mainly concentrated on his/her role in presenting the story.

In medium-sized markets, reporters might be expected to take on some of the tasks of others on the news team, possibly editing the final piece for airing, but would still be assigned a videographer to shoot the story’s visuals, including the standup. Some reporters might know how to shoot and edit video, but it was usually neither expected nor encouraged. Similar to a major market, others did the visual work; as a reporter, you concentrated on the words, keeping the story short, sharp and accurate. Visual skills helped, but they weren’t expected.

In small markets, the term television *reporter* was really a misnomer. In these markets, due to economic pressures and fewer resources, the reporter was expected to do it all. That meant setting up the story, deciding who to interview, doing the interviews, shooting the interviews, shooting your own standup, writing the script, recording the narration, picking the video, editing the video, doing the live shot or set piece or, possibly, even anchoring the whole newscast of which the story is a part. This arrangement came to have a term of its own. It was called being a “one-man band” and one of the incentives for moving up in market size was the opportunity to cease doing every job and just concentrate on reporting. Again, how times have changed!

Fast forward to the year 2010. In one of our Power Profiles, you’ll meet Joe Little. He is the contemporary version of the “one-man band,” but with a difference. A reporter at San Diego’s KGTV, Little thinks of himself (and his employers label him) as a “digital correspondent.” Still, like the “one-man bands” of TV’s yesteryears, he writes and reports his stories, shoots all the video that goes into them, including standups, and edits the final product on his laptop’s hard drive.

For today’s *digital correspondent*, accumulating the visual skills needed to tell the story across platforms is not an option, it’s a necessity. Whether the medium is print or TV makes little difference. For this generation of storytellers, carrying a hand-held camera for taking still photos or video, a digital audio recorder, and a laptop seems as natural as carrying a spiral-bound notebook was to reporters of previous generations. If you are a student or a working professional, success ultimately depends upon recognizing that you can no longer think of yourself as a reporter *or* a photographer *or* an editor. You will be expected to have all three skills and perform each at least competently, if not exceptionally.

Multimedia performance skills are not limited to local television stations, nor are they limited to local stories. As early as 2003, what were then termed “a new breed of multimedia television reporters came to global attention” on the battlefields in Iraq. The term

then was “sojos,” for “solo journalists.” A news article written at the time described them this way:

Whether they operate independently or with the support of a news organization, the gear package – all originally developed for consumer use – is similar: a DV camcorder, a laptop computer (usually an Apple Macintosh Powerbook G4), video editing software such as Apple’s Final Cut or Avid’s DV Express, compression software to squeeze the images, and a laptop-sized satellite telephone to transfer the pictures and sound back home.

A skilled multimedia journalist, equally adept at writing/reporting, audio and video recording and editing, with on-camera skills and enough proficiency to operate a small satellite telephone, can tell a story from anywhere in the world. As it was described back in 2003 and as it has been refined since, the multimedia reporter – having mastered several traditional trades – first prepares the story, writes the copy, and shoots still and/or moving images, including his own “standup” in front of the camera. Then, the reporter creates a voice narration, edits the images and completes an edited video news report on the laptop. Finally, the report is “compressed” and sent as a video data file back home through the satellite telephone.

Preston Mendenhall is an NBC news veteran with a TV news background. He describes himself as a “one-man band” and is a prime example of someone who has mastered the skills of multimedia reporting. In his backpack is about \$15,000 worth of video equipment that he uses to snap photographs and shoot video in war zones around the globe as an international editor for MSNBC.com. “You get a connection, set up the camera, point it at yourself and just do it – you’re live,” Mendenhall said.

Some question the wisdom of having one person do the job of many – reporter, editor, camera and sound operator. On the other hand, no one disputes that for today’s journalism students and those currently working in the field, it is a reality. And it can be a benefit to those who do it well, giving them ultimate control – one might say *power* – over their stories and their own performance. Whether you have a predisposition toward or talent for print or television journalism, begin thinking of yourself now as a multimedia storyteller. You’ll see that term (along with similar ones like “digital correspondent”) used in job postings for most major news organizations. It represents more than a change in titles or position descriptions.

Chances are good that even if you begin your career as a newspaper reporter, you will eventually do television reporting, especially if the paper for which you work is part of a larger media corporation that owns television stations, if not radio outlets as well. Knowing how to present your story in these media is essential. And every newspaper and television station, regardless of its overall ownership profile, has a web site. There you will be required to think “web first.”

For television reporters, it is inevitable that you will be asked to contribute to the parent company’s print product, either through text or photographs, not to mention the web site. If you go into TV reporting or already work in it, you can expect that you will do more than simply report. And you won’t just have competition from print reporters, many of whom now must be adept at the presentation skills necessary for performance on TV or the web; there is a whole new movement toward multimedia performance in the field of public relations – one that can put effective PR storytellers front and center.

Public Relations Professionals

There is often a misconception that public relations practitioners are not reporters, at least not in the same sense as journalists. The reality is that, while news reporters and PR professionals have very different goals, they share the same sets of skills. The common denominator: effective storytelling. Everything we've said so far regarding the need for print and television reporters to adapt their skills for multimedia storytelling is true of PR professionals. Why? For one, the field of PR is increasingly a world driven by capitalizing on opportunities to speak directly to the audience, unfiltered and bypassing what was traditionally the "middle" man – the reporter, print or broadcast. To a certain extent technology has made this possible. To a large extent, social media have made it compelling.

If you work or aspire to work in public relations, you should plan to think as much about telling your own stories to a targeted audience as persuading print or broadcast reporters that they should give you coverage. The "old" days of writing a news release about a client's issue, product, or cause are fast fading. No longer is the PR person's principal job to mail or fax the release, follow up with a phone call, and maybe even drop by the desk of a reporter for additional persuasion. Today's public relations professionals are more reporters than "flaks," a somewhat derisory term employed back when the principal job of the PR person was to deflect bad publicity about her or his client. Today, it's preferable to convey direct, unfiltered good news about that client.

A decade or two ago, a PR person might hope to "lure" print and broadcast reporters to an event staged on behalf of his or her client's rollout of a new product line by writing a traditional news release, containing basic facts and providing some background information. The goal was to spark interest among the print and TV reporters, the conduit to the audience you wanted to reach. Journalists might tell your story to their audience, but only if it first interested them. So, a news release might be drafted that would look like the one below:

Anzur and Silvia Associates

For release: August 4, 1992

Contact: Terry Anzur, 640-5555; Tony Silvia, 640-5514

LOCAL FIRM DEVELOPS FIRE ANT CURE

The end to annoying fire ants is now at hand, thanks to a revolutionary new product developed by scientists at Pest Free America, a Los Angeles firm. On August 21, firm officials and those who developed the ANT EATER will demonstrate its effectiveness at company headquarters on Hollywood Blvd. The ANT EATER uses scalding hot water, injected several feet down into the soil beneath it, through a series of hoses hooked to one master pump. It's portable, safe, and uses old-fashioned "boiling" to rid yards and gardens of red ants, also known as "fire ants." The pest populates mostly southern and western portions of the US and is especially troublesome to those who work outside or do landscaping. While some people are allergic to the ant's bite, for others, it can be fatal. This is the first affordable home application for what promises to be a hit with consumers and a relief for farmers.

Then there would be a list of people from the company who would be available for interviews on-site the day of the news conference. A so-called “press kit” (since renamed a media kit) would most likely accompany the release, containing still photos of the invention, testimonials from test groups if not actual customers, perhaps a schematic explaining the operation of the ANT EATER, etc. The PR person’s job would be to get the print and television reporters to the news conference site by engaging their sense of what a “good” story was for their particular audiences. Certain “beat” reporters – those who cover specific kinds of news as opposed to general assignment reporters, who cover anything and everything on a given day – might be targeted. In this instance, it might be those who write about science, the environment, or technology.

Keep in mind that the entire goal was to convince others to provide you, the PR person, with news coverage for your client’s product. Toward that end, yesterday’s public relations person simply “baited” the coverage, but had no control over whether it actually reached the proper audience for the product. In other words, PR people, while possessing similar writing and researching skills to their journalist counterparts, were completely at the mercy of print and broadcast reporters to spread their message – or not. Their only tools from the 1920s until the 1970s consisted of the typed news release, the telephone, and, later, the fax machine. Beginning in the 1980s, public relations practitioners enlisted a new resource called the Video News Release (abbreviated as VNR).

The VNR was intended to look just like a finished television news story. It contained interviews with all those associated with the story and was narrated by a person who sounded and looked very much like an actual television news reporter or anchor. Often there was a reason for this similarity: the person in the VNR sometimes was actually a former TV reporter or anchor who switched jobs from journalism to PR – not an uncommon career path, as you’ll see in Ann Kellan’s profile in Chapter 6. The hope was that a well-produced VNR, fitting within the TV news time frame of less than two minutes, would run in its entirety on a local newscast. That might actually happen in smaller television markets. In larger ones, portions of the VNR might be edited into a story done by the local TV reporter or anchor. Either way, the PR practitioner – still very much at the mercy of the reporter – considered it a “win” for her/his client. And, as a bonus, sometimes the visuals and overall storytelling might capture the attention and support of a newspaper reporter as well.

As exposure on television became more important, the VNR became more slickly produced. Company interviewees became more polished in their presentation skills, usually as a result of coaching by the PR practitioner. With more sophisticated visual elements, the overall “look” of a VNR became vastly more appealing than a flat typed news release, no matter how well it was written. PR people, whether trained journalistically or not, began to take on more of the storytelling role of the print or broadcast journalist – no longer simply “pitching” the story for coverage, but orchestrating that coverage themselves. Multimedia has accelerated this trend, making a strong case for PR practitioners to have the writing, producing, and performance skills that once were the sole domain of their print and broadcast colleagues.

The effective public relations professional today is no longer in the background of news coverage. Managing a client’s image now includes everything from designing

multimedia-rich news releases – replete with opportunities for audience interaction – to appearing on-camera, either on traditional television or via the web, possibly even on a cellular phone screen. Increasingly, PR people reach out not only to journalists, but directly to consumers, encouraging them to drive the story through social networking media, according to James Lee, president of the California-based Lee Strategy Group (see his Power Profile in Chapter 6).

Today's Citizen Journalist

Of course, today anyone with a laptop and Internet access can produce and distribute informational content that once was the domain of the print/broadcast journalist or the public relations professional. The term “citizen journalist” has come to represent a person who uses all the tools of the multimedia journalist – text, audio, video, graphics – to tell a story that might otherwise not receive coverage in traditional or mainstream media. His or her motivation may stem from an interest in a certain subject or loyalty to a specific cause or community. The main difference is that, while newspaper and broadcast reporters as well as PR practitioners are professionals, paid to do their jobs, civic journalists sense a need in their community and fill it – usually without pay and sometimes with a small audience base.

Often the forum is a blog (the term that arose from the combination of “web” and “log”) on the Internet and some civic journalists even develop a relatively large following. One upside to citizen journalism is its strong roots in the democratic tradition of connecting with a community, using readers, viewers, and users as a resource for what is sometimes seen as a “conversation” between those with a stake in the outcome of an election, a zoning board decision, a tax increase, or construction project. The downside to citizen journalism is that it can look amateurish in terms of its overall look and production values. Citizen journalists often have little formal training in journalism or media and many see their work both as a balance to corporate-owned news media and as an important contribution to public dialogue.

Citizen journalists face the same performance challenges as professional journalists and public relations practitioners. They need the skills associated with producing “value-added” content, rich with video, audio, graphics, and interactivity. They must also develop presentation skills, whether for a community cable television show, a web site, or a social media outlet like Facebook or Twitter. After all, whether you seek to be a print or television reporter, a PR professional, or a citizen journalist, your goal is the same: reach an audience in the best way possible.

An Inventory of Needed Skills

So, if you're a print reporter or studying to become one, what skills must you develop in order to be competitive in today's media job market? What if you're a television reporter

or in college learning to become one? How about a public relations professional or student? And what skills do community journalists need? A list of skills for each is given below; a fuller exploration of each is contained within the chapters related to that specific media job. As you might expect, this inventory contains much overlap, but the intent is to suggest what skills in general each traditional job holder or seeker currently has and which skills he/she needs to develop or refine.

Which skills do you have and which do you need to be an effective storyteller in the multimedia environment? It is a question often asked by students and professionals alike. Our inventory is a good place to begin assessing your *power performance* skills. Choose from the check-list below the traditional media career path that best describes where you are or where you want to be.

General skills check-list

Job description: Newspaper reporter

- Traditional skills possessed: writing for print, editing for print, some web writing/editing skills.
- New skills needed: still photography, photo taking, video shooting, presentation skills (on-camera and voice), video editing (putting finished story together on laptop), graphics design, podcasting, refined web writing skills, social media skills.

Job description: Television reporter

- Traditional skills possessed: writing for broadcast, editing for broadcast, video editing, presentation skills (on-camera and voice), and some web writing skills.
- New skills needed: writing for print, editing for print, still photography, video shooting skills, refined web writing/editing skills, graphics design, refined web writing skills, social media skills.

Job description: Public relations practitioner

- Traditional skills possessed: writing news releases for print and TV, producing video news releases, planning news conferences, arranging interviews for media, serving as spokesperson for client.
- New skills needed: creating multimedia packages for print and TV, performance skills (on-camera and voice), coaching skills for clients to appear on web, TV, or social media.

The check-list above is not intended to be exhaustive, since there are no doubt individuals in each traditional job category who already possess to some degree the skills from other media that are suggested as “new skills.” But many do not and, further, do not know where to begin.

Self-Inventory: The Right Stuff

The qualities of a successful multimedia journalist

Now it's time to determine specifically where *you* fit as a storyteller in today's multimedia environment. Take a few moments to assess your strengths and needs in each of four key areas: personal qualities, reporting and writing, presentation skills, and technical know-how.

Evaluate yourself in each of the categories listed below. Identify:

- skills you have not yet developed
- your areas of strength
- skills you already have begun to develop that are targets for improvement.

Review your list with someone who knows you well enough to be honest. Does that person agree with your self-assessment? Why or why not?

Personal qualities

Table 1.1 Personal qualities

| | <i>Must learn</i> | <i>Strength</i> | <i>Needs improvement</i> |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Curiosity | | | |
| Persistence | | | |
| Energy, enthusiasm | | | |
| Strong work ethic | | | |
| Honesty | | | |
| Self-confidence | | | |
| Takes initiative | | | |
| Open to new ideas | | | |
| Open to viewpoints I disagree with | | | |
| Good listener | | | |
| Sensitive to feelings of others | | | |
| Responds well to criticism | | | |
| Works well under pressure | | | |
| Team player | | | |
| Well organized | | | |
| Meets deadlines | | | |

Reporting and writing

Table 1.2 Reporting and writing skills

| | <i>Must learn</i> | <i>Strength</i> | <i>Needs improvement</i> |
|--|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Can get information | | | |
| Can verify facts | | | |
| Attention to details | | | |
| Asks good questions | | | |
| Can get people to talk | | | |
| Solid news judgment | | | |
| Can write for broadcast | | | |
| Can write for print | | | |
| Uses correct grammar | | | |
| Uses correct spelling, punctuation | | | |
| Can identify more than one side of a story | | | |
| Learns quickly | | | |
| Writes clearly | | | |
| Can simplify complicated information | | | |
| Draws on education/life experience | | | |
| Can see the “big picture” | | | |
| Knows the audience | | | |

Presentation skills

Table 1.3 Presentation skills

| | <i>Must learn</i> | <i>Strength</i> | <i>Needs improvement</i> |
|--|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Has a pleasant voice | | | |
| Good posture | | | |
| Correct breathing | | | |
| Uses variations in speed and pitch | | | |
| Avoids filler words like “um” | | | |
| Proper pronunciation | | | |
| Speaks clearly and distinctly | | | |
| Emphasizes what is important | | | |
| Can improvise or “ad lib” | | | |
| Makes an emotional connection to the story | | | |
| Listens and reacts appropriately | | | |
| Uses meaningful gestures | | | |
| Non-distracting hairstyle | | | |
| Appropriate use of makeup | | | |
| Wardrobe is suitable for situation | | | |
| Encourages a positive response from the audience | | | |

Technical know-how**Table 1.4** Technical know-how

| | <i>Must learn</i> | <i>Strengths</i> | <i>Needs improvement</i> |
|--|-------------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| Word processing | | | |
| Internet search | | | |
| Operate digital camera (photos) | | | |
| Operate video camera | | | |
| Record audio | | | |
| Use lighting as needed | | | |
| Edit audio and video | | | |
| Post text, photos, and video to the web | | | |
| Knowledge of web design, HTML, Flash, etc. | | | |
| Social networking | | | |
| Embraces new technology | | | |

Adapting to New Media

Obviously, you will need to learn additional skills and adapt to new job descriptions as multimedia continues to evolve. Today's journalists perform many more tasks than their predecessors of previous generations. It is, however, worth noting that some of the earliest of those we now revere as the pioneers of broadcast journalism worked in what we might call an early incarnation of multimedia. Edward R. Murrow, often termed the "father of broadcast journalism," worked in print journalism, for a news wire service, radio, and television. He even worked for the US Information Agency, in what might today be described as a public relations job, following his departure from CBS. One can only imagine that if the Internet had existed in the 1950s, Murrow would have readily embraced it as yet another medium to disseminate his reporting. His seminal documentary program, *See It Now* would have been not only broadcast, but streamed on the web. It would be available as a podcast or a download to mobile devices.

To suggest an example, Murrow's politically charged program on Senator Joseph McCarthy would be adapted to the web in an interactive manner. Viewers would be able to delve further into the life of this enigmatic man to decide for themselves if his mission to rid the US of communist infiltration during the 1950s was patriotic or frightening. There would be a Facebook page where fans of the show and of Murrow himself could "friend" the broadcast icon, exchanging updates and messages. Other social media would allow Murrow to keep his audience aware of reaction from politicians, sponsors, and other viewers. He could promote upcoming shows, not only *See It Now*, but *CBS Reports* and *Person to Person*, the celebrity interview program for which Murrow was also famous.

No one, of course, can say with certainty what Edward R. Murrow or others of his generation would have thought of the Internet and social media. Based upon his stated belief to an assembly of radio and television news directors in 1952 that the medium of

television was nothing more than “a box of wires” if it failed to educate the viewing public, one might surmise that Murrow would have been excited by the web’s expanded opportunities for illumination of difficult issues. On the other hand, he might have also bemoaned it as one more distraction from what he saw as the serious business of news. This doesn’t detract from the primary point: Murrow, like others of his generation, moved fluidly and flexibly from one medium to another. Half a century before the term “multimedia” was invented, Murrow and his colleagues thought nothing of writing a story for a newspaper, doing another version for one of the wire services – Associated Press or United Press International – anchoring a radio newscast, and going down the hall at CBS to read the news on-camera for its television network. Job titles come and go, but *power performance* of storytelling skills is a constant – no matter what the job is called.

Whatever the specific media platform on which you work, your personal *brand* as a storyteller is a combination of the skills you have, the integrity you reflect, and the value you bring to an audience. Keep in mind that, as a storyteller in today’s world, you are, indeed, a brand. That brand is reflected not only in your newspaper by-line, but through your television persona and your online presence, every time you post, blog, tweet or interact on Facebook. Maintaining your place as a multimedia brand means knowing what others around you are doing – and what you need to do just to keep up.

News anchor or digital host?

Legendary newsman Walter Cronkite was a print journalist before he assumed the role of anchor of the *CBS Evening News* and became what many polls called him: “the most trusted man in America.” When Cronkite died in July, 2009, among the many tributes paid him was one by NBC’s Brian Williams who referred to him as “America’s anchorman.” Cronkite began his professional career as a wire service reporter, having first worked at his college radio station. Before transitioning to TV, he anchored news on the CBS radio network. Upon his death, one story mentioned the vast number of reporter’s notebooks he had saved over the years, each filled with fine details of stories covered, each a resource for writing longer versions of those he found especially compelling. Cronkite’s legacy in many ways was this ability (similar to Murrow’s) to move fluidly and flawlessly between media platforms – print, radio, and TV – without missing a beat.

When President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in November, 1963, Cronkite first delivered the fateful news to a nation on television over a slide announcing a “CBS News Bulletin.” He did not appear on camera until later that hour. History tells us that the television crew was on its lunch break and there was no one to turn on or operate the cameras. Cronkite fell back on his radio skills, doing the best he could with voice only. He also wrote his own copy, not just on that day, but on most days for most broadcasts.

Cronkite, like ABC’s Peter Jennings, kept a manual typewriter near the anchor desk and was known to write or change copy during commercial breaks. He was a writer and an editor; he used his voice and his visual presence, knew when to rely on film to tell a story best and when it was sometimes better to reassure a nation using the warmth and confidence radiated by his own image on-camera. He could do it all. Sound

familiar? Again, it is in many ways the same expectation employers have of today's journalists.

Broadcast historians note that Cronkite was responsible for the coining of the term "anchor" following his reporting from the Democratic National Convention in 1952. The term was meant to describe someone who was at the center of the storytelling, the person who "held it all together." Cronkite personified this new job description at a time when TV news was just coming into its own, expanding from a nightly 15-minute news "round-up" to a full half-hour broadcast. TV was hiring those with strong writing and editing skills honed in other media, principally newspapers, wire services, and radio, as well as the ability to adapt to a changing media landscape. In many ways, it was a time similar to our own. Multimedia is creating new job descriptions, such as "digital host."

The term was first seen on the job listing site of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in 2009 (poynter.org), amid other ads looking for applicants with web design, online writing, digital editing, and multimedia skills. The qualifications stressed all of the above. Formerly, the collective skills sought in three or four individuals, the job title itself implies someone who can do it all and, like the anchor of a previous generation, "hold it all together." The media platform listed was online, appearing on-camera to provide a thread between audio and video clips, slideshows, and graphics. Without over-generalizing from a single job listing, it is just one example of a new description for an evolving job across media platforms: the person who can guide an audience through a myriad number of stories by using her/his skills to create and present content in a credible manner. If the audience for Walter Cronkite misses his calm reassurance and credibility on television, the online audience is still waiting for his counterpart on their computer screens.

Cross-Platform Influences

To return to where this chapter began, let's think again about how the world of media – and with it the role of the storyteller – has changed between November 22, 1963, the date of the JFK assassination and June 29, 2009, the day of Michael Jackson's death. If you've ever watched the television coverage of the former, you can't help but recall the stark black and white images of the networks' news anchors – principally Cronkite on CBS and Frank McGee, later joined by Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, on NBC. These two networks dominated the coverage, with ABC, a fledgling news operation, barely in its infancy. Video (it was actually film in those days) was virtually non-existent. The processing time plus the distance from Dallas made it impractical for purposes of "breaking news" on television. The only extant film clip of the actual moment the bullet struck the president was captured by a home movie camera; it was operated by Abraham Zapruder, a bystander to the event.

Two things are remarkable from viewing television's coverage of this major event in American history. First, nearly all the TV coverage depended on reports not only from the networks' own correspondents in the field, but also from wire service reports (Cronkite got his first confirmation from one) as well as newspaper and radio reporters on scene. It was, in that sense, a sharing of resources across several media platforms, not unlike the

cross-platform journalism of today. A primitive telephone hookup served as the live link for questions and answers from the anchors to the reporters. They used the phone, the only tool they had, to weave the story together from many sources and correspondents working in many different media. One might say they were *resourceful*. Or you could use the term *multimedia*.

Second, platform aside, what is most remarkable and enduring is the *storytelling*. Over four decades ago, as the nation mourned, without knowing they were doing so, the journalists of another generation used what they had at hand to tell the story that an anxious nation awaited. They were *innovative*. As the great jazz musician and band leader Count Basie once told *Downbeat* magazine in 1975: “I don’t find innovation very interesting as such. The real innovators do their innovating by being themselves.” The rules hadn’t been invented for how to cover a story of this dimension or where the media boundaries were drawn. So, they crossed all the boundaries. In that sense, it could be argued they were practicing a form of multimedia storytelling even back then, complete with a citizen journalism component (the Zapruder film).

The TV networks got their information on the Kennedy assassination from other journalists within the established media corps: print, radio, or wire service reporters. From the first report of Kennedy’s shooting to the final pronouncement of his death in a Dallas hospital, broadcasters relied on other reporters for the story they disseminated. They did not rely on the audience (with the admittedly major exception of Zapruder’s film) for details or insight into the assassination or its aftermath. Most of the news came from officials, both in Dallas and Washington, and was relayed through reporters from various media at or near the scene. The audience for the story was passive, not active, and certainly not interactive. If anyone from the general public knew more than the officials, experts or journalists who dominated the coverage, they had no way to contribute.

Today, it would be difficult to imagine news coverage of any major event without the Internet and its social networking sites. When the government of Iran expelled all foreign media from the country in 2009, news coverage of improprieties within that country’s elections didn’t end; it shifted instead to Twitter, as ordinary citizens were motivated to spread the story beyond their sealed borders. In fact, when Twitter followed a planned shutdown for upgrading on the day of national elections in Iran, it sparked such a protest in the US and elsewhere around the globe, that the upgrade was delayed so the election story could continue. With today’s cell phones, digital cameras, wireless Internet access and other communication alternatives like Skype, as well as Twitter and Facebook, interactivity to and from the audience becomes a vital part of every journalist’s repertoire.

An unprecedented collaboration between CNN and Facebook during the 2008 US presidential election resulted in an audience on the social media site that far exceeded that of the network’s television viewing audience. It is not hard to discern why the partnership was successful. Given that it has become commonplace for politicians to communicate with their supporters through social media (Barack Obama being, if not the first, certainly the most visible and effective candidate to do so), the news audience is already conditioned to receive information through this medium. Using it as one more tool can make today’s multimedia journalist both *resourceful* and *innovative* – the same qualities that made those journalists covering JFK’s assassination successful.

The opposite of those qualities involves what sometimes appears to be desperation or resignation by traditional news media in their approach to covering a major story. If the JFK assassination coverage in 1963 was among journalists' finest moments, it shared little in common with the coverage of Michael Jackson's death in 2009. Because so many in the audience already knew about Jackson's death not from radio, TV, or newspapers, reporters struggled to come up with new angles. That struggle led to the Internet, the place where celebrity news (in fact, increasingly, most news) often "breaks" first. The sight of an *NBC News* correspondent structuring his television story around the "exclusive" web cast of the 911 call that followed Jackson's death is telling on a number of levels. The correspondent waited during his live shot for the *tmz.com* audio clip off the Internet to load, and then simply amplified it for the TV audience to hear.

This scenario should provoke some questions for you to consider. Discuss the following, either in class or among your friends:

- What makes this a story, if you believe it is?
- What did the reporter in this situation provide his audience beyond what they could easily get for themselves by going directly to the web?
- What does this say about how the media landscape has changed?

We ask these questions for a very important reason. Beyond the specific tools used by today's journalists, consideration must be given to the process of storytelling itself – what it is and how it has changed. If multimedia adds anything to storytelling, it should bring added value to that process – audio, video, graphics, slideshows, an illustrative standup, anything that makes the story clearer, more understandable, and more interactive. In Chapter 2, you will learn how to tell compelling stories that begin with solid writing, strong research, and a keen sense of audience. Then, we will show you how the thoughtful inclusion of multimedia can make a good story even better!

A Multimedia Exercise

In this chapter, reference was made to news media coverage of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963. The only existing film that day derived from a home movie camera. If a sitting American president were assassinated today, how would the story be covered across media platforms? Imagine that you are in charge of coverage for a newsroom where you have the obligation to cover that story for your parent company's newspaper, radio station, television station, and web site. What elements would you assign to each medium and how would they differ across platforms? What role would social media play in covering the story? Finally, how would multimedia be used to the greatest possible advantage?

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COURTESY NBC



BRIAN WILLIAMS

NBC News

Job: Anchor and Managing Editor, *NBC Nightly News*

Market: National, based in New York

Hometown: Elmira, NY, and Middletown, NJ

Education: Attended George Washington University and Catholic University of America, Washington, DC. Left college for White House internship.

Career Path:

Assistant administrator; National Association of Broadcasters political action committee, Washington, DC

Reporter; KOAM-TV, Pittsburgh, KS

Chyron* operator; reporter; WTTG-TV, Washington, DC

Reporter; WCAU-TV, Philadelphia

Anchor-reporter; WCBS-TV, New York

Correspondent, *NBC News*, New York

White House correspondent, NBC, Washington, DC

Anchor; managing editor; MSNBC, New York

What life experiences prepared you to become a journalist?

I never had a dime for college. I've worked since the day I turned 14 and qualified for working papers in the state of New Jersey. Because of the lack of money I had to start out at a community college after high school and I was working two jobs, and fighting fires as a volunteer. I transferred to two different four-year schools, but eventually had to drop out. I've regretted that decision, but it wasn't a credential that has stood in my way in a business where, if you can write and report, that's all the bosses are interested in.

Note: *A chyron operator is a technical support person who types the on-screen titles that will be superimposed over video during the live newscast.

If you didn't learn it in college, how did you learn to report and write?

Role models are really crucial. The anniversary of Apollo 11 (the first landing on the moon) had me thinking back to watching Walter Cronkite every night as a kid. You couldn't eat dinner until the *CBS Evening News* was over. It was kind of like having a master class in broadcast journalism every night on a black and white television in our living room. It's that simple. I had the very best role model. Decide whose work you like and make the decision for sound reasons, not cosmetics, but on the quality of the work. Does it look like they wrote it? I can usually tell when I fly into a city and watch the local 11 p.m. news I can tell you who went out to dinner between the 6 and 11 and who stayed in the newsroom, got takeout and wrote the copy. Selecting as a role model a professional that you admire in terms of work ethic, work quality, and presentation is part of it because it's a visual medium.

How did you land your first job in broadcasting?

I got work by answering a classified ad in the *Washington Post* for a typist. The job happened to be at the National Association of Broadcasters, the lobbying arm of the industry. After working there for a long time I confided in my boss that my real goal was in television news. A station in Pittsburgh Kansas was willing to take me on as a rookie. I ended up moving out there, to the Midwest, starting a new career for \$168 a week in 1981.

Was it worth it?

After 13 months in Kansas, I wasn't even at the poverty level in this country. I assumed it was a failed experiment. I couldn't get hired anywhere: Springfield, Missouri, Jefferson City, Tulsa, Wichita and Topeka were too big for me. I took all my accrued time off and got in my car with a bunch of tapes, trying to get the attention of news directors. Nobody would hire me. I ended up moving back to Washington where I knew I could find something.

So why didn't you give up?

I've always said that the term "hustler" isn't a pejorative. I hire hustlers, I'm attracted to them. A hustler is someone who knows how to make a living, survive and make their own luck. I knew I could hustle a job or two and put food on the table. So I went back to DC and got a job from another classified ad doing weekend chyron* at the independent 10 o'clock news station, WTTG. That was the break. I had a news director just take a liking to me. She took a leap of faith and put me on the air. Then someone at CBS saw my tape and they put me into their Philadelphia (station), WCAU.

I was able to work my way up to New York. But that was by hustling as well. I called the (WCBS) assignment desk and said, "Can you send me a (microphone) flag?" Atlantic City was just opening. Casino gambling had gone through and (Donald) Trump was flying in and all these other companies were building casinos. I was doing lots of pieces (for the Philadelphia station) that were of interest to New York. So I would take off the Channel 10 mic flag and talk the crew into shooting a new standup close for Channel 2. I would (send) tapes up to New York and they started airing my stuff. My motivation was simple: #1 market, both parents were still alive and I figured if I could come home they would be able to see me on TV and know that their boy had become something.

Do you write your own copy for *Nightly News*?

I am still forced to write my copy because I can't read anything cold. I have almost a kind of dyslexia when it comes to reading someone else's writing. It's not that mine is better, but how could they know what I was going to say? How could they possibly know how I was going to tell this story? I'm compelled to write and put everything in the broadcast in my own words. Some days I wish I was one of those who could look in the prompter and just go, but I've never been able to do it.

What's your thought process when you tell a story?

It really helps to know your audience. During my time at CBS, (a researcher) came and told us that everyone in our audience has a Sears credit card, what used to be known as America's largest retailer. Having grown up in a

Sears credit card household, that told me everything I need to know. I have a mental picture of John and Mary Viewer, including an average age, military experience or not, in some cases a room full of people of various ages, races, ethnicities. That's what I'm thinking about when I sit down to do the writing. Nothing matters but how the viewer is going to perceive it.

I always say the camera is like an MRI; it goes right through to your soul. People who watch our broadcast regularly have a pretty good idea who I am and I can tell they are trying to confirm that when I encounter them at airports and stores and restaurants. They start to know your sensibilities, the kinds of stories I like to tell. On the stories where you can show a little opinion and attitude, they know I'm kind of a libertarian and that I'm a friend of the military and they know I was a fireman. You'd be surprised how much they can know about you.

Is it more of a two-way conversation with the audience now because of multimedia technology?

Every day I have a blog due in the afternoon. It's a whole new deadline. It's not like I was sitting around with free time that I hadn't allocated. We post a lot of the behind-the-scenes stuff, the background from interviews. Or I'll use the blog to say, "You know what? We screwed up last night. We got something wrong, we omitted this or that, it wasn't our best effort." It's a nice reporter's notebook outlet for me. If Cronkite had written one of these things as a kind of viewers' guide to the broadcast, I would have loved it.

The *New York Times* has called your coverage of Hurricane Katrina "a defining moment." Was it your most memorable story?

Katrina was one where we were there before the first responders. We were there before the storm, in the Superdome, and we just watched it unfold. I've never truly witnessed a story unfold like that. These were Americans floating past me face down, the victims of a terrible, embarrassing, botched federal response. These were people no different from me, and their government just didn't seem to care that much about them or their plight. When you see dead citizens on the streets of a major US city, it was an outrage and a lot of us said so. I could not believe what was happening to my fellow citizens there. I get it that the storm was nobody's fault, but, boy, those first hours and days afterwards sure were.

What's your advice to multimedia journalists?

Talk to people the way you talk to the people you love. You wouldn't patronize them or announce something to them. You wouldn't use a different voice or a big persona. Envision your audience and just talk to people.



RESOURCE

THE IMAGE OF THE JOURNALIST IN POPULAR CULTURE

Web site: <http://www.ijpc.org/>

What: The IJPC Database is available to anyone and includes more than 75,500 entries on the image of the journalist in popular culture.

When: Founded in 2000 and used daily by scholars and researchers worldwide.

Where: A project of the Norman Lear Center and the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, CA.

Why: To investigate and analyze – through research and publication – the conflicting images of journalists in film, television, radio, fiction, commercials, cartoons, comic books, music, art, video games – demonstrating their impact on the public's perception of news gatherers.

Who: Joe Saltzman, a professor of journalism at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, is director of The IJPC.

How has the image of the journalist changed over time?

Ancient journalists offered news of the day from the beginning of recorded history to the fall of Rome. In ancient Greece, news gathering was an oral tradition, with so-called historians, who were more like journalists, "broadcasting" to the town square or discussing current events and history with their students. The epigrammatists of Rome were doing exactly what gossip columnists do today, writing about the bad or funny things people do.

The image of the journalist hasn't changed much in more than 2000 years. It's a continuing dichotomy. The reporter or editor could get away with anything as long as the end result was *in the public interest*. The journalist could lie, cheat, distort, bribe, betray, or violate any ethical code as long as the journalist exposed corruption, solved a murder, caught a thief, or saved an innocent. Most films about journalism end with the reporter or editor winning the battle, if not the war. At the same time, the most indelible image may be that of the journalist as scoundrel, as evil, as the worst of villains because they use the precious commodity of public confidence in the press for their own selfish ends. If the journalist uses the power of the media for his or her own personal, political, or financial gain, if the end result is *not in the public interest*, then no matter what the journalist does, no matter how much he or she struggles with his or her conscience or tries to do the right thing, evil has won out.

It's a fallacy that the image of the journalist today is not as good as it used to be. The news balladeers of ancient times would go to see a hanging and write a poem or a ballad that they would sell to the crowds leaving

the event. In 1625, Ben Johnson wrote "The Staple of News" launching a vicious attack on newsmongers because they were making money from information. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a host of novelists wrote parodies of the well-known editors of the day. Popular novelist James Fenimore Cooper, for example, wrote two novels about Steadfast Dodge, an editor who was as corrupt as a journalist can be. Many films have been based on novels about journalists. *Five Star Final*, released in 1931, is one of the most vicious attacks on journalism you'll ever see. The last shot is a picture of a newspaper in the gutter with mud being swept on it. The editor washes his hands throughout the movie as if there is something dirty on them. Boris Karloff, who made his fame playing Dr. Frankenstein's monster, is one of the sleaziest reporters in the history of the movies, masquerading as a minister to get the story. He plays a despicable character who looks as creepy as his ethics. The film was based on a Broadway play written by a newspaperman who worked on the tabloids. Everybody talks about *The Front Page* as one of the great movies about journalists in film history. But the reporters in *The Front Page* behave unethically by today's standards. Journalists in films of the 1930s and 1940s did terrible things, but they were played by the most popular actors of the day, so people transferred their love of the actor to the character and forgave them almost anything.

Is there a difference between a journalist and a storyteller?

A storyteller can make up a fictional story. By the 1950s, journalists established an ethical framework within which to tell the story. The journalist has to be a storyteller within the confines of accuracy and fairness, or he's a bad journalist. If the journalist is good, he or she will tell compelling stories with interesting characters. But a lot of journalism is simply transmitting information efficiently. There isn't a journalist, real or fictional, who doesn't feel that working for a newspaper or a TV station or a web site is beneath their skills. In the old days they wanted to be novelists or playwrights. In the present day, they want to write movie scripts and TV pilots. They want to get respect and most journalists believe that journalism is a stepping stone to something better.

Journalists can also be commentators, columnists, critics, cartoonists, and editorial writers. These people write from very specific points of view. They may be lying or you may just disagree with them. But it's not just news gatherers and reporters. The word *journalist* came from the act of writing in a journal, which was usually stating an opinion. Most of the journalists in history had a point of view. The whole notion of not having a point of view, of being "objective," is a fairly new term from the mid-twentieth century. It became the code of the journalist to be fair. Now everybody fears that we are losing it again and going back to the way it was. During the Civil War, for example, you couldn't find a paper in the South or North that was going to write a fair account of a battle.

How are journalists viewed in a multimedia world where anybody with a computer can be a journalist?

I believe the Internet is what democracy was supposed to be. Many Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries envisioned that freedom of the press in America meant that everybody would have a press and write a newsletter, that everybody would have the opportunity to speak, and out of this chaos would come truth. That belief proved to be a fantasy. There was a whole history of itinerant printers who would go from town to town creating newspapers for a livelihood. But along the way it became expensive. Only people with money could afford a press. Nowadays we all have our own press. Anyone can write a blog and each reader will evaluate what it means to him or her. You are seeing more bloggers in fiction. There's a TV show called *Ghost Whisperer* in which a blogger played a key role, revealing information and causing problems. In the movie *State of Play* a young, inexperienced Internet journalist is paired with a seasoned (print) reporter and they work together to expose corruption.

What can multimedia journalists and researchers learn from this database?

This database includes entries on film, television, fiction (novels, short stories, plays, poems), radio, commercials, cartoons, comic books, video games, the Internet and all aspects of popular culture. The database is a compre-

hensive roadmap, a starting place. But the actual research, scholarship and writing are up to the individual. You have to actually watch the films and read the novels. For example, it is fascinating to trace the mythology of Superman and Clark Kent from 1939 to today. Whether it's a comic book or a radio show or a film or a TV program, the mythology never changes. It's one of the great stories of the image of the journalist in popular culture because young people who are discovering the TV series *Smallville* may not realize that these are the same images established in comic books more than seven decades ago. Lois Lane is still a feisty female reporter; Clark Kent is still the loyal, hardworking journalist trying to be fair and accurate. Perry White is still the crusty editor; yelling at the reporters all the time. The comic books have taken Clark Kent into television, and recently some of the *Daily Planet* staff were fired due to cutbacks.

How does the image of the journalist appear in diverse cultures?

In the 1940s, there were black editors and reporters in "race movies" made for the African-American audience, but there weren't many black reporters portrayed in the mainstream media until Sidney Poitier played a photo-journalist in *The Bedford Incident* in 1965. Some 30 years later, Denzel Washington played an investigative journalist in 1993's *The Pelican Brief*. From the 1980s on, many African Americans were featured portraying weather or sports reporters, and they can be seen in anonymous groups of reporters, but there are few Asian or Hispanic reporters visible until the late twentieth century and most of them can only be seen in groups of reporters trying to get a story at a press conference or a courtroom.

Numerous regions and countries are represented in the IJPC database: Australia, Canada, China, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Russia, Spain, and especially India. Nearly every Bollywood film has a reporter running around. The database can be indexed by country.

What lessons from the database will be useful for the multimedia journalists of the future?

By studying the image of the journalist, young journalists can see in bold letters that it's an important profession. What a journalist does matters. Whatever you write or say, people are reading or listening. And it makes a difference. Without journalists, no democracy can survive. It is crystal clear; when you see a dramatization of the journalist on the big or small screen, that it's important to do the job of a journalist well. If you do not serve the public interest, you are in for a bad time.