1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

Panel 3: Storytelling

Are we really creating a new style or "language" for the new medium?

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Panelists:
Glen Golightly, Houston Chronicle's Virtual Voyager Coordinator

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Howard Witt, Associate Managing Editor/Interactive News, Chicago Tribune

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RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: We are going to be talking this afternoon about storytelling. Are we really creating a new language or style for the new medium? I'll introduce the panelists and then I'll ask each one of them to give brief remarks and thoughts about the topic and then I have some questions but we are certainly looking forward to hearing y'alls questions as well.

Howard Witt is the Associate Managing Editor/Interactive News at the Chicago Tribune, and he's responsible for supervising an editorial staff of 65 people who design and produce the Tribune's Internet news products. **Janine Warner** is the online Managing Editor of the Miami Herald. She heads a team of more than a dozen developers who publish both the Spanish and English language newspapers on the Web everyday. **Elizabeth Osder** is vice-president of iXL-Media & Entertainment and she started out as the publishing

news and information specialist in the New York Times electronic media company where she directed product development for the Times on the Web. **Glen Golightly** is the content supervisor for the Virtual Voyager project at the HoustonChronicle.com. He's been a content developer and wire editor for the service as well. Before that he was a reporter for the Houston Chronicle and the Dallas

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

Business Journal. I'd like to start off asking Howard Witt to give us his thoughts on the new language of the new medium.

HOWARD WITT: Well, this is going to be out of character for me, but I'm going to be grim and cynical. There is no such thing as new style of online storytelling and all that other cool stuff. It doesn't work, we've tried it, we've been there. No one is interested in looking at it. Advertisers aren't interested in advertising on it. Actually, at lunch I formulated what I was told was a pretty good sound bite, so I'll use that. This morning Gerry (Barker of the Dallas Morning News) was talking about how eBay is such a phenomenon, how we as newspapers should have done eBay and he is absolutely right. But back when we should have been doing eBay we were too busy worrying about creating non-linear storytelling and the rest of that crap and therefore we ended up with nothing that worked. So that's kind of my opening remark.

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: Thank you Howard.

JANINE WARNER: Well Elizabeth and Howard and I agreed that I would be the optimist stuck in the middle between the two cynics. I have to agree a little bit that I think the fundamentals of journalism in storytelling that work for print are the same for the Web. And many of the questions here that were sent to us in advance really struck me, "Do people read or scan online? Should we do shorter stories online than we do in print." People read and scan newspapers.

I learned as a journalist that you wrote so that it made sense at the end of every paragraph, not just because the editor might cut it but because your reader would cut it. How many people read a newspaper just by scanning the headlines, or reading the first graph here or maybe a couple of graphs? But only when they are really interested in a story do they go deeper. And that's where I think online we have an advantage because we can go a lot deeper online than you can in print.

I think on the top level a lot of the same things apply. People are going to scan, they are going to look for things they are interested in but when they find what they are really interested in and they can go deeper on your Web site, that's what you can do that print can't. You can give them searchable databases, you can give them history, you can give them perspective, you can link to other sites that have information you couldn't produce. That's where you can surpass and go beyond and that to me is a lot of the new storytelling.

ELIZABETH OSDER: My thoughts on this are, well, they are not necessarily negative. I like to think that they are sort of realistic and I wish that our newspaper companies and media companies would have got with the program a lot earlier.

I once got up in front of a room and gave a speech that was titled, "In praise of shovelware." I described the New York Times, I don't know a lot about biology, but some sort of primitive reptile lizard that was new media crawling out of the water

and trying turn its gill into a lung and like breathe new air and figure this out, figuring that would take a really long time, that things evolve very slowly, they don't change overnight. So I try to take a long view of this and I feel really sad for what's happening, because I think Howard was right to the point, that we blew our wad on a lot of things that there wasn't an audience for. I hope to heck that the media companies out there continue to invest in new media, interactive journalism, online or whatever this is going to evolve to be, and that they don't feel like, "Okay, we are not getting our business rewards" and they pull back the reins just when there is beginning to be a critical mass of audience.

The long view I like to take, I also teach, and one of the things I like to start thinking about with my students every semester is, "What is going to be the life cycle of your career. What is going to be the trajectory of your career and how is what you're choosing in your classes to be your core competency, how does it relate to any of these evolving media." I have this little thing, let's look at a 22-year-old kid who is retiring at 2041, what kind of journalism and what kind of environment are they going to be doing these things in? I can tell you that there will be trends and patterns in that 40-year professional career that we can't even imagine, even in the four of five years we've been intensely trying to codify and say what's going on out there. So my little maxim I give my students on this is basically I think that we have been in electronic media in the age of utility right now. Where the fact that I just got an e-mail from Levis.com telling me that I'm going to get a discount on what I like to buy from is really helpful to me and that works for me today with the technology being delivered by e-mail.

I think that five or six years from now we will be in the "tell me more" world. And when we have enough bandwidth to tell me more, to go deeper into a story, if there was an audience who cared which is another thing we have to be honest about. That "tell me more" will be something that works better when it's more a world of video with buttons for words rather than words with buttons for video - when you can click on a TV show and get a statistic.

I think in 2041 I like to pretend with my students that it will be a world of immersion journalism, where you just sort of walk around for the news and it sort of comes into your mind somehow. I don't know how we are going to get there, what sort of story forms it's going to be, but what I can tell you is is right now I don't think it's anything but experimenting with rocks and sticks and very, very primitive tools that are going to be outdated pretty soon.

GLEN GOLIGHTLY: I would say that there is really no new style of storytelling since caveman and cavewomen sat around the fire and told stories. I think life is kind of non-linear. The challenge is we have had all these Web tools developed in the last few years. I've been playing with video and audio and panoramic pictures, and you get enamored with all this, . . . I call it crap. We are in the testing stages, we are in the Lego stage and it's not quite the Erector set going to whatever the next level will be. But I think we are building something for the future and a story is either compelling or it's not no matter how you tell it.

3

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

The problem is we get enamored with, "Oooh, isn't this cool. I've got a video." Or I've got this picture that jumps out at you and makes this annoying sound, or something. I think the basics are still the same. You are either a good writer or you're not, a good photographer or not. This stuff translates to the Web and I think you still have to have the basics. You have to be creative and talented and tell a good story no matter how you present it. If you can't do that, then you really don't have anything.

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: Let me ask Elizabeth real quick because she says we had spent a lot of money on stuff that didn't work. I'd like to ask her what did not work?

ELIZABETH OSDER: Not worked can be judged editorially, as content, as people who developed things. It can also be judged as business. I think that what didn't work was generally the old principal, "Know your audience."

Basically, we spent a lot of resources developing things for audiences that weren't there and not learning from them. What didn't work is a product development cycle for trying out new forms, learning from what people used, and then continuing to develop from that. For instance, I did great stuff early in my career. I won cool sites of the day. I invented Cockroach World, I built the site for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and did live reporting to the Internet and the New York Times in the Week in Review on all those sites. Those were great experiments. But I didn't do those every day of the week. They were special projects, they were learning curve products and we didn't blow the wad on all of them. They were special high points.

I just think what worked is understanding that it's very complicated to do a big Web production when you experiment with all these tools and they are not things that you can do day in and day out and that you need new skills. To be blunt and say it didn't work, if we were investing the resources today in some of those projects that happened a long time ago, there actually might be some people out there looking at them given the fact that the audiences have grown.

HOWARD WITT: You can tell the Web is a wonderful thing - you know instantly what works and what doesn't because you know instantly how many people looked at stuff. So actually, contrary to what Janine says, I don't want to destroy your enthusiasm, but we and a lot of sites have been offering deeper stuff and more information if you want it, and past stories, and more photographs, and databases and all that stuff. I look at the usage patterns and nobody looks at that stuff.

[The Chicago Tribune](#) was guilty of what Elizabeth was talking about. We spent huge resources in the first couple of years doing what was called Web specials and we were insistent upon creating a new paradigm, new ways of story telling and creating these wonderful audio-visual packages, and they were wonderful. We just won another prize for one a couple weeks ago from Sigma Delta Chi, a wonderful public service award. You know how much traffic we got on that wonderful site? Page views were minuscule. You know how many advertisers were interested in putting an ad on

4

it? Zero. So the economics and the reality of usage are such that we can't play around anymore. We lost the moment to play around in the initial stage. Now we have to prove these are viable businesses with a lot of nuts and bolts, simple bread and butter things so that maybe we can win the right to go back and experiment again.

JANINE WARNER: I have to cross a line again because I was arguing that I am on the content side and that's why I get to be optimistic because they have to worry about business too much. But one thing I would say about specialized content is we're finding although you get a lot more impressions, meaning more people look at the ad on the front page, we tend to get better click throughs, people actually following the ad and going to it on the more specialized content. I think there may be some trends with advertisers realizing that even though some of that specialized content isn't getting a million page views, it's getting them six new MBA students. Or it's getting them sales on content that they sell at a premium and that is worth buying. So I would argue that there is not necessarily a need to attract millions of people to be effective in the content production.

HOWARD WITT: Could you give the phone numbers of some of those intelligent advertisers?

JANINE WARNER: No way.

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: I just moved from North Carolina in August and in North Carolina, in '96 I believe, the Raleigh News and Observer won a Pulitzer prize for a big series on hog farming, which I don't know about y'all but I don't have much of an interest in hog farming. I suspect that not that many people read every single word about that series. However, it was a really important public service and based on that it won a Pulitzer. Isn't there some part of the story telling that goes to appealing to and covering stories that may not have automatically the broad interest, or perceived broad interest, yet it addresses some concerns that people should know about?

ELIZABETH OSDER: I'm going to kind of go off track and I'll try to get back to that. You have to work from the premise of what works and what doesn't, who is going to use it. There is an appetite for breaking news out there. There is an appetite for short forms. There is a skill set and story telling technique that has been honed by the high-priced and well respected wire editors that for so many years that should now take a leadership role in writing content for online. That's a particular thing that I think journalists are comfortable with, that breaking news matters. That is again a very, very different skill than what has been packaged up as non-linear story telling and new story telling techniques. It's an old story telling technique in a new medium that makes a lot of people interested and accessible to that.

In terms of the Web being a place for stories that might not have found news hole, I still think that those important stories like that they should be finding a news hole in the newspaper. Because of the bottomless news hole you don't want to junk a lot of

5

stuff up there. You have to be a more discerning editor because there is so much garbage out there on the Internet, so much bad stuff that I hope that the future of editorial on the Internet is that people will want to know where the good editors are with the respective brands and looking for priority and crafting of information. And that is less of a story telling thing than more of editing values, and principles that content can represent.

GLEN GOLIGHTLY: Part of our operations is we have the news side, you shovel content onto the site, they look for breaking news. But one of our thrusts has also been to keep people on the site longer with some non-traditional things. "Stickiness" is a word I learned today. Try to get them to come back to the site over and over again, not just for breaking news which they come to the site and they are gone.

So we tried some non-traditional approaches, and one of them is we have these two people sailing around the world on a sailboat with a satellite phone. I think they are totally crazy, but they file us a dispatch every day about their adventures on the sea. They have survived two typhoons, you name it. People come every day to check the site to see what their latest adventure is. And that brings people to the site and we hope it makes them go a little deeper into the site, or sideways or something. That's really a niche market. I'm finding a lot of the people that go to that site are people who like to buy boats or sailing and that kind of stuff. I think it is one way to bring people to the site. Okay, it's not breaking news, but it's getting people on to the site and this is something you don't get in the paper, it's exclusively online.

I think developing niches can bring people in. We started a space site a few years ago just to carry space shuttle audio from Mission Control and I thought I'll do this every few months or whenever there's a mission. But the site took off. People e-mail, "Hey, why are you doing this, and this, and this?" So we had to hire a full-time person to develop the site when it was like a part-time job for me. So I think part of the thinking has to be, "What does the average person want? What kind of market can I fill that's not being done?"

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: These people going around the world, are they staff people?

GLEN GOLIGHTLY: No, they are not traditional journalists. One is a former school teacher that owns a company, the other one is a nurse and she has written books. I checked out that they were literate, that they could write. I think they are crazy, but not psychotic or anything, and that they could actually file dispatches and carry out what they wanted to do. We edit their copy pretty closely because they didn't go to journalism school, they don't know what AP stylebook is, but the content is so compelling it is worthwhile cleaning up. I've never been through a typhoon, I don't want to be either.

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: Not to go far off, but that would seem to raise some liability concerns if y'all's newspaper is carrying that.

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

GLEN GOLIGHTLY: Well, they signed a contract as usual that says we are not responsible for anything you do, blah blah, if you get in trouble you are on your own. We own exclusive rights to the online content they provide us. They can write a book or do whatever they want. We have a pretty comprehensive contract a freelancer will sign that pretty much (says) if they screw up and it's their fault, it's on them.

JANINE WARNER: I will add a little bit to that. I think today on the Web we have a pretty high brow demographics still. And as that becomes a broader audience, I think we really want to remember that it is a broad audience and if we only go after the high demographic where we can sell lots of advertising we are forgetting the community service in journalism. That would be a real mistake. Speaking to journalism students, to really make a passionate plea, part of why I got interested in the Internet a few years ago was that when it does reach that broader audience, I want to make sure there are some people there who still care.

I have a question for the rest of the panelists though out of curiosity. I'm often embarrassed to admit what our top hits are on our Web site. What does attract the most attention on your Web site?

HOWARD WITT: In order, the most popular things by far are our classified advertising, people searching for homes, for cars, and for jobs. Actually not in that order, jobs is first. That shouldn't be too surprising because that reflects what the Web does best. I mean, the Web is an incredible tool, it's an incredible way to get at a database and information and extract information that is specifically relevant to you. Classifieds are born to be on the Web. It's why newspapers are so concerned about losing them because they are done so much more efficiently on the Web. So our classifieds sites are far and away our most popular things.

After that, it's sports, after that it's horoscopes, and after that, some where lower down, it's news in general. Now, we are starting to change that dynamic a little bit with news because just in the last three months we started doing something incredibly radical and that is actually covering local news during the daytime. So in order to capture that audience we are doing original reporting and covering metropolitan Chicago throughout the 9 to 5 day. That is starting to get us some significant traffic. That's our general order of breakdown. What's yours?

JANINE WARNER: Well, similar if you take out classifieds, because I think they are in a different category. Dolphins, it's the football team for those of you not into sports. Dave Barry, who if you are into Dave Barry you should know that the Dave Barry for President Web site, this is an ad, will soon be available only at MiamiHerald.com. That's actually a lot of fun to work with him. But those are our top two hits in English. In Spanish, our top hit is Walter Mercado, who if you don't know is the horoscope god of the Spanish-speaking world. The front page gets a few hits too, but . . .

ELIZABETH OSDER: I haven't been at the Times for a couple of months, but when I left the largest area was breaking news from The Associated Press. ("Oh wow," and

laughs heard from panelists). Again, I take a disclaimer. I could be mistaken because it's been some time but if I recall that was it.

GLEN GOLIGHTLY: We are pretty much the same, classifieds are usually number one. Comics are real popular for some reason And sports, if the Rockets are doing well sports jumps to the top and page one. My stuff actually dropped off considerably as the site's gotten bigger. That's been the problem. The site was originally pretty small. We produced all sorts of original feature stuff it got a lot of hits and looks great because the site was so small. Now, the site is gigantic. I could still be getting 20,000, 40,000 page visits, page impressions a day and I don't make the top 10 because the Rockets are doing well, or something.

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: I was at a conference a few weeks ago, at the [Freedom Forum] in San Francisco, and John Pavlik from Columbia University from the [New Media Lab] was there, and he talked a little bit about the online journalist of the future. They are working with a lab where they have this deal where the reporter would be out in the field and be carrying a mini-cam kind of thing on his or her shoulders and then have a helmet. The helmet would have a little camera so whatever the person is looking at is being photographed. Then they can pull out a little keypad and they can type out the story. I was interested in hearing Howard that y'all are using the same thing. Is this true?

HOWARD WITT: That we are using that? No.

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: No I'm kidding you. But you did say that y'all are sending reporters out to actually cover stories during the day. Are y'all using the newspaper's reporters, or you have your own?

HOWARD WITT: We use both reporters. We use our reporters and the newspaper's reporters. Again it goes back to what we were talking about during the earlier panel, you don't ask people to do things that detracts from what their primary mission is. So, when a newspaper reporter is covering a story and we want to get something there if they can afford to break away from the story in order to file to a rewrite person or to one of our reporters, they do that. It's not a problem. But if a reporter is covering a murder trial, you can't very well ask the reporter to leave the trial for an hour and miss the testimony in order to come file something for our site. In that situation, we will send one of our reporters there and basically double-team it because there is no cheap way to do this. If you are going to do it right, and you are going to keep the quality up, you can not expect a person with a traditional role, which is to write a 1,000-word story for tomorrow morning's newspaper, to also break away and do something for the Web site and still get the same quality level of story you have in the morning's paper. The idea of strapping cameras to people's heads, that's just gimmickry and silly.

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: Are your reporters ever asked to come back with photographs?

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

HOWARD WITT: They were a few years ago before I started being, you know, mean. No, I don't let people take photos who aren't photographers because reporters don't know how to take pictures.

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: Anybody else have any thoughts on that?

GLEN GOLIGHTLY: I think the suit's pretty cool. I talked to John about it when I was up there last fall and I think it is pretty gimmickry right now, but I think we'll see it at some point, somebody using it.

We usually double-team. We actually produce some of our own breaking news. We'll cover the breaking news ourselves at this point because we are still having a little trouble with working with the newsroom based on their demands to file the stuff early before the 9 p.m. deadline.

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: Do your reporters ever take their own pictures?

GLEN GOLIGHTLY: We do. We pretty much have to. We kind of trained ourselves in some of the stuff. I like taking photos so I try to match the person with their skill set.

ELIZABETH OSDER: Just on [John Pavlik's](#) concept, I think it's an interesting thing. Maybe it's something like the gear they will wear in 2041 so they can experience "immersion journalism," whatever that's going to be.

The whole thing, for me it begins to drive home the point, we always talk about the story forms, and I don't know whether we have been doing this enough, certainly nobody has archived all these stories to study it, and I've talked to a lot of students in the last few years who are trying to study it and make things out of hypertext, but what I think that what really resonates for discussion again, is what are the journalism skills that it takes? One of the things to mention, I think the new skills for my students, nothing to do with the job that traditional journalists are doing, but since I'm in a school so I'll throw out this concept, which is not to expect that every reporter answers e-mail now when their job is to be a reporter and they don't have time to do that. Not to expect that everybody takes pictures and engages in some other crap that they don't care about.

But I think as we move forward in people's professions there is going to be more of a job for people in the media to facilitate those things that are unique about this medium. Like, it's not really about online, or it's really not about being new. It's really about being "computer mediated" and "interactive." And what are the roles of the people who facilitate that? What does it mean to be a live television reporter who has the skill of going around bringing in comments from people? What is the role, and what kind of skills do I look for in people that hosted the discussion forums at the New York Times? What does it mean to be an expert in something? What does it mean to be able to phrase the questions to draw out a response to keep people on topic. Those are some interesting new skill sets that I don't think should compete

9

with current roles, but those are new. They used to be writer, photographer and editor and maybe that's some kind of a new skill that I think is more interesting than a lot of new technology.

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: You bring up the question about what skills are required. I know in my last job as a newspaper reporter I did take a lot of my own pictures because I'd be out in the middle of no where and there were no photographers around, or else they were photographers who worked at monthly newspapers, so I did take a lot of my own photographs. New York Times reporters overseas take a lot of their own photographs in remote places. Are there things that you think we can help our students develop now to be ready for these new jobs.

JANINE WARNER: I was really impressed this morning when Rosental said that the thing you are most trying to teach your students is how to teach yourselves. And that it's not about learning html, or how to make real video, or how to take pictures with a digital camera. It's about learning how to learn quickly what tomorrow's technology is going to be. I spoke at a high school not that long ago, and I was thinking about, it was career day and what are you going to be when you grow up? And I thought, you know, what I do today didn't exist when I was in high school. And when I do five years from now probably doesn't exist today. The most valuable skill I have I learned in journalism school, it was the ability to teach myself. When people would ask me how I got from being a bilingual managing editor to writing computer books, I said, "You know, it's the same skill set." Whether I was writing about immigration law, or commercial fishing, or Dreamweaver, the Web design tool, it was the same skill set. You're training as a journalist will get you further than anything else you can actually learn that's specific to a skill.

ELIZABETH OSDER: Back to the original question about a new language, with language comes a new grammar. I think that the new grammar for this medium, in producing what ever this is, I say sometimes the Web is dead, it's something we can't even see now, is the only new grammar is basically for everybody to appreciate going forward. Everybody may have an expertise, but you should understand the grammar of visuals, you should understand the grammar of words and interactivity and all those different things. All the different disciplines have different skills and you should at least understand and respect what your colleagues and people who have different core competencies know so you can work with them and call them in to produce something of value going forward.

If you have to do it all yourself with the John Pavlik outfit, at least you know enough about when you should use a word and when you should use an image and when an audio clip should fit into the dialogue, or when a graphic works to produce something that actually articulates a story. What you have now in your tool chest is a whole lot of different new pieces. We are fixated, I think, on how we are weaving them together rather than a respect and understanding of the craft involved in each of those, and the story telling power in each of those.

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: You mentioned a little while ago the reporters may not have to respond to their e-mails if they don't have time, and I guess one of the major advantages that's been touted about the Web is the interactivity. What's an effective way of using the interactivity? Who is using it?

HOWARD WITT: I haven't seen a lot of effective interactivity. E-mail is very effective. We encourage all of our people who work on the online site, and also the newspaper's reporters, to communicate with readers when they send an e-mail. E-mail is important, it's one-on-one, it's very time intensive, but it's very valuable and you can win over a reader with one thoughtful response to an e-mail. That's a reader who you have really touched and that may become a lifelong reader because they have had a real interaction with the newspaper. That's really important.

All of the other stuff, interactivity, message boards, we have message boards, everybody's got message boards. In our sports area they are very active. They are also incredibly profane and stupid, but they are very active. I've yet to see a lot of really intelligent conversations in message boards. There have been very few points when I have seen message boards work and realize this vision everybody talks about of interactivity. Actually there are two, when two people died. When Mike Royko died, our columnist, we had a phenomenal outpouring from around the world of people writing memorials of what this columnist meant to them. We had thousands of messages, and these weren't little two-line messages, "Hey Mike, we're gonna miss you." You know, that's stupid stuff. It was, people were writing hundreds and thousands of words about how this man who they had never met had touched them. That was incredibly poignant and that was very fascinating to me, a glimpse of what the power of the medium is because before the Internet existed there would have been no way for these people around the world to share communally their thoughts. That was amazing.

And then most recently when Gene Siskel died, same thing happened. Again, you saw these very thoughtful comments from people. So on these rare occasions, which we cannot manufacture. We try to manufacture this stuff and it does not work. When it spontaneously seems to happen, when people really care about something, there is something magical that happens in terms of interactivity. As I say, we have not found any formula in order to do that on a regular basis.

Comment from the floor: (From **Paul Cox**, Wall Street Journal Interactive Edition) First, Mike Royko belongs to the Chicago Sun-Times. You only borrowed him late in his career. (laughs) That kind of interactivity at the Journal, a number of our columnists have done Web-only features. They've solicited e-mail and then in various forms have done a more dialogue piece, Web only. But I think that's opened up a whole new channel for them, where they are hearing from this wide range of people from all over the country that give them new sources, new story ideas, and obviously the Journal relies heavily on the anecdotal story telling thing. If you've got more potential anecdotes, if they walk into your e-mail box, it's a great thing. I think if you asked any of them, yes it's been some work to do that project, but I think it's opened up this whole new avenue where they are getting input and dialogue from

11

the people on their beats. I think in total they'd say it's a positive thing that's helped their underlying column, which is where it all started.

Question: Doesn't this really speak to where it will go for the beginning, that this medium doesn't belong to one-way projection, it really belongs to the audience?

JANINE WARNER: One of the things that drew me to the Internet was that it is two-way. When people talk about how expensive it is to get online, and the obstacles to getting information from the Web, that's going to work itself out the same way television is in more households than telephones today in the U.S. The part that's exciting to me is that you can publish on the Internet so cheaply. When you look at what 30 seconds on television costs, and you compare the accessibility in terms of access to producing information and what the Web does, that to me is where the most dramatic changes.

The two interactive things that came to mind to get back on your question, were hurricanes. When they happen we get some very interesting discussion happening, people trying to find each other, find out about each other, you know, "Mi abuelita in Honduras, how is she?" That kind of thing.

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: Are these chat areas?

JANINE WARNER: Discussion areas. Chat I think of as real time, discussion as happening over time. We do set up chats with usually sports stars and they do okay. The discussion areas are where the quality conversations seem to be more likely to happen, although I don't spend much time in the Dolphins' chat room, or discussion area.

The other interactive piece that we've been adding, with some success, and I know I've heard other people in this industry about how hard it is to maintain these things, but putting up databases that go with stories. If you do a real estate story and you put up a searchable database of housing sale prices in the area, or we just up a database about summer camps that you can go and search for if you want horseback riding, or if you want to know if they have swimming, or if you want to know if they are in a particular geographic area, you can actually do the search yourself. So going beyond what you can do in print into something that's a little more interactive.

ELIZABETH OSDER: I suppose my favorite story I'll just share with you from ancient history at the New York Times, probably three years ago or so. I was very proud of the discussion boards we ran there. I think in general, the concept of community and interactivity how it is manifesting on the Internet right now is woefully disappointing and is going to be embraced much more by direct marketers who understand two-way response to sell things rather than get people feeling a warm fuzzy sense of each other. In the end, there are some amazing examples out there. Ebay is about obsession and things that you are interested in and that's why you spend time there.

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

Well, once at the New York Times many years ago, a land far away, we had ELIZABETH OSDER who was in charge of community and she had no help, which is a common story for us all. We had a lot of discussions, we had incredibly robust discussions at the Times about political affairs, very high levels of discussion. But there was this welfare reform discussion that was getting so big and we had this old software, this threaded discussion software, and the thread got so long it was like 600 K. It took like four minutes to open. Who had time? It was a lawsuit waiting to happen, all the boards, to go in and investigate them and see what was going on. We also this had poorly trafficked sort of cultural area with nobody in there facilitating discussion. One day I hired somebody to go and sweep around these boards to see what was going on. They came running into my office and said, "Oh my god, welfare reform is in modern dance." At one point, welfare reform said en masse as a group, "Hey, this is too big, we can't talk here. No one's in modern dance. Let's go there and talk." So modern dance had become this gigantic thread. We saw this, we flowed with it. We said, "Great that you found a place to be here, so I'm going to change it to welfare reform again and knock it up into the right category, thanks for keeping the discussion going."

And then two weeks later something happened. It wasn't a conspiracy like people want to accuse the New York Times of. It was just we couldn't support the software any more, it was crashing our servers. So we had to switch to a linear software from a threaded software. And there was an incredible outcry from the welfare reform people that we were a conspiracy, that we were trying to kick them out. So they picked up and went en masse to the Philadelphia Inquirer that had the old software and they continued their act there. So people are out there doing their thing and we can bring them together. Whether it is a mass audience that we can build a marketplace around, I don't know. But some of it was fun.

JANINE WARNER: One of my favorite descriptions of that is consensual anarchy, which is really I think what rules those kinds of discussion areas when they work well.

ELIZABETH OSDER: Web Crossing is what we went to from Net Thread. Web Crossing is what everybody uses out there. Not that I want to say anything about software, but everybody uses Web Crossing because it's $1,000 and it's the best thing in the marketplace out there right now. This is not an advertisement. But the problem is it is not integrated into your experience. If you go to a Yahoo chat or Yahoo club, you have your personal page and your discussion comes up right there. You have this integrative experience between discussions, your discussions you like to go to, and content. No newspaper's really deployed anything that gives an integrative discussion experience with stories and personalization yet, which I think really doesn't bring people back in discussions the way it should have. That's a product development issue.

GLEN GOLIGHTLY: I think one of the interesting things about the two-way communication on the Internet and the Web is, it might even improve the image of journalism. I know we are ranked right below used car salesmen or lawyers or

13

something these days, whatever the latest survey is. I think it could be kind of painful for some journalists but it really takes down the image of being the gatekeeper, of "I'm going to tell you what is important and you had better agree with me." I had one of the reporters say, "Well you know, I'll tell people what I think they need to know. They don't need to see the 300-page document. That's my business. They'll read what I write and that's it." Well, what if I think you are a lousy reporter or something, I want to check you out.

So I think that improves the image of journalists if they say this is what I'm writing and here is some documentation to back it up. Who's going to read 300 pages? People read the Starr Report I guess, I didn't read it, well, parts of it.

Also, it seems to me the two-way communication is quick. When I edited our space site I would get mail instantly. "Hey, that's a typo." I never got that as a reporter. It might be a day or a week later that I might get a phone call or a letter. People are watching right then, I was, "this is kind of scary." They were looking over my shoulder as I put stuff online. I think that can help journalism. It might be painful for some people, some of the old-timers or people who think like old-timers.

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: How comfortable are y'all, I mean I assume that probably everybody in this room is not feeling that we have to jealously guard this gatekeeper role. There are some people still who feel we need to be the authority, but in some ways I've heard the Web referred to as one medium that is kind of changing all that because people can publish on the Web so easily. You don't necessarily have to be a journalist. In this country you don't have to be licensed to be a journalist, other countries you do, and that's kind of frightening to some people I know. Can y'all talk a little bit about the gatekeeper.

JANINE WARNER: I think there is a credibility issue that I hope will help us maintain readership even as there are more and more options. You can start out wherever you want, but as I think there are more and more advertorial sites out there where you can't really tell if this is sponsored content or not, whether an advertiser put it up or just put an ad next to it. If newspapers maintain that ethical line that they were talking about this morning, that credibility is one of the things that will keep readers coming back to us. That is a little about being a gatekeeper, about making sure that you don't just put press releases online, and you don't just let the advertisers say whatever you want. That you discern that information and there is a training you get as a journalist and there is a reason for it. Not everybody has that.

I'm completely in favor of everybody being able to put a Web site out if they want to. But I think that readers are going to appreciate newspaper for the same reason they pick up the Wall Street Journal, or the New York Times or the Miami Herald instead of the pamphlet someone is passing out on the corner for free. I think readers are pretty good at discerning where the quality is and the integrity and that's a lot of the gatekeeper role we need to maintain on the Internet and will be called to maintain.

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

HOWARD WITT: Sure, everybody can publish anything they want, but who has time to look at all that stuff? I mean, I hate spending time on the Web. I go to the Web to get something specific I want and I want to find the most efficient way to get it. If I want the most efficient report on Kosovo, if that's what I care about, I'm going to figure out who is my reliable provider, whether it is my newspaper, or the Times or somewhere else, and I'm going to go back there over and over and get the information. If I want to buy a used car, I'm going to figure out who has the best used car site with the most used cars on it that makes it easy enough for me to find it. That's where I'm going to go to get a used car. There can be all of these wonderful voices, independent observers with cameras strapped to their heads, that's fine, but I just I don't have time to look at it. Maybe somebody else does.

JANINE WARNER: I remember thinking a year or two ago that the next time there is a Persian Gulf crisis it would be really interesting to be able to see the Iraqi camera crew and not just the CNN camera crew. And I do look forward to that kind of thing starting to happen.

ELIZABETH OSDER: Gatekeepers, I think quality's going to matter in the end. I'm not saying that any traditional media company that's out there is as esteemed as the New York Times or the Chicago Tribune will produce it. I think there are lots of new people producing good things and I think the cream will rise to the top and we'll see. There is new competition but the silly old thing, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Everybody can be out there publishing all they want but no one's really listening and it doesn't really matter. It may matter to one or two people and that's good.

I really believe in quality and I just think that online right now we are in this period where content has become commodity, wires, generic information, people are confused about the difference between editorial and advertorial. They don't care. It's crazy to think that they do, but over time quality will find its niche again and those people who want to come and find it will find those places. But we are at a time right now where we are just so junked up with stuff out there that it's sort of hard to figure out where to go.

GLEN GOLIGHTLY: I think there is a good future for editing. I didn't mean the lack of gatekeepers to mean, you know, just fling everything out there and you can sort through it yourself. I think there probably is the best future for editors ever because there is so much to sort through, and to categorize and index and summarize. I think that it's great that we can document stories with additional information, as long as we present it in the right fashion.

When I was still Net editing it was during the O.J. trial and I thought it was the coolest thing, I could take 15 wire stories and put them all up. They are all the same story and this was great, people can read all the this stuff. After a while, I was like, "Who would want to read all this stuff?" I should have summarized them if I had the time and put together one really great story and some pictures. But at that time it

15

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

was, "Here's 15 stories from every major paper in the country." And we thought it was pretty cool. But now it's, "Who wrote those things?"

So I think of journalism as editing and gatekeeping. I see gatekeeping as a kind of negative thing. I think the major media, hate to use a marketing term, are branded so people know they recognize the major media. They'll recognize somebody is publishing a parody site or some goofy Web site. And they can do that, it's fine.

Question: Is there a way for you to figure out what articles are read by so many people?

HOWARD WITT: We know that exactly. We know exactly how many people look at every single thing we put up there. Not how many people, but how many page views, how many times that article has been accessed.

Question: Do you use that to follow up stories?

HOWARD WITT: Do you mean do we sue that to inform out news judgment?

Question: No.

HOWARD WITT: Well actually that's a good question. I would have to say in all honesty in that yes, when we choose to devote our limited resources to things and it's a choice between two equally good stories, we might decide to do the one that we think is going to get us more traffic than the one that won't. It doesn't mean we are going neglect the other story, you can still get the basic information you want. But where we decide to put our extra effort on things, it is driven by what we know from experience is popular. Now, there are certain constraints on that. I've been trying to persuade my boss for some time to put pornography on the site because I know we would get a lot of traffic for that. (laughs) He won't let me do it.

Question: (by **Linda Ash**, New Media Managing Editor, [San Antonio Express-News](#)) I just wanted to mention that the story on Expressnews.com that got the most attention ever was an all-America thing. We have a pro wrestler in town named Sean Michaels and he was injured and then he retired from the business. That got more hits, I mean, it was number one for two weeks. We weren't writing the stories but that that story was just phenomenal. So we of course put up a chat, and more people came, and it was all teenage girls. Any time Sean Michaels' name popped up on our site the traffic picked up by word of mouth, or e-mail, and we would just get the hits. It was amazing.

What I wanted to know is, do y'all mirror what's on your front pages? We don't do that every day. We know our readers by what they are looking at. We try to basically to have the same stories, but if it's on Kosovo or its' an AP wire story we are not going to put that up, we are going to put a local story up. But what do y'all do?

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

JANINE WARNER: That's a good question actually. It's been fascinating to participate in the budget meetings we have. We have two newspapers, one Spanish, one English. So I send a Spanish news editor and an English news editor to budget meetings every day and then they come back and we have our own meeting and discuss how we are going to play things on the Web site, and often it is different. Sometimes it's different because we perceive that we have a more international audience so sometimes we won't play up a local story as much because we know that we have people who are more interested in Latin America or the U.S. We'll keep the local stories up there but maybe not as the lead.

A lot of times with business stories, what's on the front of business in the paper is such old news by the time someone reads it on the Web that there's no way we are going to make that the lead. I've had business editors say, "How come you didn't play up that story?" Well, because you can get the stock ticker up to the minute on the Web, or at least every 15 minutes depending on where you go. Perceived audience and the breadth of our audience, timeliness, those are the big ones that affect (the news decisions).

And then I have the ability to see what the two newspapers are doing and I have to say they don't always talk to each other that well. So sometimes I learn something from the spanish news room or the english news room that affects the decision we'll make on one or the other.

Question: (by **Linda Ash**) How do your newsrooms react when you say when something like the Sean Michaels story is number one over your lead stories on the front page?

JANINE WARNER: So far my strategy has generally been not to break it to them.

GLEN GOLIGHTLY: I'd start writing more stories about wrestlers.

JANINE WARNER: Actually I was interested, one of my colleagues in Philadelphia said they go to the budget meeting every day and give those results, the top hit story was this, the top hit story was that. And it was affecting the decisions made by the print editors in terms of what they might play up the next day because this was feedback they have never gotten before. I think that's really interesting and actually it's something I'm trying to institute with my two news editors. I'm a little concerned about it because our audiences are really different. I'm not sure that they should be judging what they do in print by what we get online.

HOWARD WITT: And your media is very different. It's neither good nor bad that a story does better or worse on the Web than it did in the newspaper. It's a non-issue. On the Web, the Web for us during the day time now that we are doing this local news all the time, that's highly perishable news. If there is a huge traffic tie-up on the Kennedy Expressway at the 3 in the afternoon and I tell people that, or there's a snow storm that is snarling traffic, I can do a 100,000 page hits on that because that's what my audience wants. It's highly perishable information at that moment.

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

That could be far and away the most popular story, by tomorrow morning it's completely irrelevant, there might not even be a sentence about it in the newspaper. So they are completely different worlds and you just shouldn't get obsessed about it. They are just different.

Comment: (by **Doug Feaver**, Vice President, Washingtonpost.
Newsweek Interactive, Editor, washingtonpost.com) I had an anecdote on the issues of gatekeepers and mediation. I really took great heart when the Starr Report came out and we hustled it on, along with everybody else in the world, on to the site just as rapidly as we could make it happen. And then the Washington Post journalism out drew it like 4 to 1 over the next several days. The stories we wrote about it were much more important to our viewers than the report itself. I really did take heart from that, I still do. I think that quality journalism will continue to have an audience and that's a useful thing for us to remember as we allocate resources.

HOWARD WITT: Did you make the Starr Report searchable by keyword?

Doug Feaver: Yes we did.

HOWARD WITT: What was the most popular keyword?

Doug Feaver: What do you think? (laughs)

HOWARD WITT: Same for us.

JANINE WARNER: See, you got pornography on the . . .

HOWARD WITT: Well we did, thanks to the President.

JANINE WARNER: It's fascinating to hear you say that because the Starr Report was a huge hit. In fact, I heard from someone at the award ceremony, one of the moderators at the ceremony in Atlanta, said it was the one day in history that television news was lower in ratings than Web news, the day the Starr Report went out. We actually translated the entire document into spanish and it was also our top hit in Spanish.

HOWARD WITT: What is Spanish for cigar?

RIVAS-RODRIGUEZ: I'd like to talk about links, external and internal. I know that some newspapers have policies they don't link externally because they feel like that gives whoever they are linking to some measure of credibility. Do y'all have written policies about linking, and is there a policy about the number of links or whether you do internal or external?

GLEN GOLIGHTLY: It's pretty informal now. I think it just depends on the context. We'll link to external sources if they help the story. If the story's about Compaq computers we probably wouldn't give them a link, that might be kind of an ad to

their Web site unless there was something pertinent there. I think it's still a subject of debate, but it's kind of up to the Web team at this point. I'm sure somebody higher up is going to discover it one of these days and make us write a policy. If it's a pertinent link, we'll link to it.

ELIZABETH OSDER: I'll speak on this from my teaching. Basically, it's one of those skills that again we are fixated again on tools and toys and graphics and things, but whether and how to link and the decision about the style in which you run your student publication, your class project, or whatever it is you are doing, is an important decision. It doesn't have to be based on giving away traffic. It's just, should you link to Microsoft's home page every time you hear the word Microsoft? I think it's one of these areas where I've had with my students really interesting conversations about a whole lot of assumptions. There's a great quote I heard, "I link therefore I am." Everybody can just have all these links. It's one of those areas where you can really have a good discussion around judgment, whether it adds value or not.

JANINE WARNER: We have a very informal policy as well. But the place that this really came to a head is with our Cuba page. Those of you who don't know, the Miami Cuban population is a rather divisive group of people. What we decided was that anybody who wants to be on that page can be because trying to justify to any of them why somebody else was okay and they weren't was not a battle we wanted to play. So if you go to our Cuba page you will find the full range of extremes and expressions about Castro. I think that was probably the best decision, the free marketplace of ideas. Our news stories reflect our journalistic integrity; those links are about everybody we know of who has a site. We've also now created a regional Web directory which is getting remarkable traffic with very little promotion because it's a place where you can find things that are specific to South Florida on the Web and that has a clear value right away. I think the motto for that is, "Anything that doesn't suck." We actively go out and look (for sites), we ask people, the newsroom collects it and we get it from them, the business desk does 10 a week, any where, every where.

Comment from the floor: (From **Paul Cox**, Wall Street Journal Interactive Edition) Try with external links to be really specific with them. You are talking about some document deep within Microsoft's site, don't link to www.Mircrosoft and just dump them at the front door. Let them find a way. Find that long complicated URL but cut it down to one button so you are taking the person right to the bit of information that supports the story, not just to somebody's front door.

HOWARD WITT: Of course the irony with that is we hate it when people do that to us because we want to drive people through the front door and force them to go through all of our ads and everything.

Question: Can you talk more about the advertising effect on storytelling, and links, and all that kind of stuff, direct and indirect. Have you lost revenue because you wouldn't take their advice?

HOWARD WITT: Well, it's not as simple as . . . We clearly don't do something like an advertiser wants us to write some puff piece about something. That's silly. The issues are far more subtle than that. The issues are, will we do the kind of journalism that you are expressing an interest in, that responsible public service journalism that is hugely labor intensive? Will we do the new kinds of Web stuff that pushes the envelope even if there isn't an audience for it? Increasingly the answers to those questions are no, and they are driven by economic realities which is that advertisers, we shop ideas to advertisers all the time. Our ad sales people take out to advertisers, "Here's five different projects that the editorial staff is working on. Are you interested in any of these?" If the answer is no then we may still decide to do it because it's important editorially. But that 's a pretty big strike against it if there is no hope of getting any kind of sponsorship for it, or an ad sold. So it's affecting our decision making in very subtle, or not so subtle ways. It's not as blatant as paid placements of stuff, we don't do that. But nevertheless it's still affecting the way news judgments are made.

JANINE WARNER: I have to concur although I have to say that's been true in print for a long time, too. I sat in a meeting with a features desk not long ago when they were discussing what sections they should start, what columns they should do based on whether there would be advertising to support it. So it is subtle. I've never heard a journalist say that they wouldn't write a story because we might lose an advertiser. But you won't start a new section unless you know there is advertising to support it. That's a reality of the business model that I would often like to change.
We recently came up with an editorial calendar so our ad reps could go out and sell it in advance. I had to laugh because one of our top hits is always hurricanes. And the business manager said, "When's the hurricane section?" Well, that's a little hard to predict.

GLEN GOLIGHTLY: We felt some pressure now and then. My boss Jim Townsend's been gracious enough to take the arrows or drive people away before I go crazy and send them away. What we've done with our editorial projects, we did a pretty big section on the Texaco Grand Prix which debuted in Houston last year, and we wanted to cover the CART racing season. One of the ad reps came in and said, "I've got some company but they want you to do this, this and this," I said no, here's my editorial budget and if they want to sponsor it that's great but they don't have a line item veto on my budget. That worked fairly well.

We probably lost a little bit of revenue here and there for that because we try to tell the ad reps, remind them constantly, "This is editorial content, this is advertising content." And they still come in and say, "Would do you do something on mattress discounters?" Well what would be interesting about that? And then they kind of look, "Oh, okay" and they go away. I think it is kind of tough but I've got a boss who kind of draws the line in the sand pretty clearly. People are welcome to buy ads and sponsor things, but they are not welcome to say, "I want you to do this."

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

ELIZABETH OSDER: I pretty much agree with everybody else. I do remember a time in the development of the Times' site that because of the very good values at the Times, that are very well preserved, there are points where we all have scars when we were most proud of that relationship and when we were most disgusted by it. I had times for all of that. But there was a time when we were developing microsites, and I wish they were archived some place because I would love somebody go back and have a good look at them, the ads I was developing microsites at the time and because they had money and editorial did not, all of a sudden all these advertising products began to have functionality and things that I was trying to develop on the editorial side for months. Like a searchable movie database that worked a certain kind of way that I had in our systems department for six months in development with the functional specification and all of a sudden an advertiser came in and wanted to sponsor searchable database and the ad department can go to a development house down the road and get the database built. So there was these sort of strange times when the ad product was better than the actual product because of that different orientation.