Change and Continuity: The Surprising Survival of the Inverted Pyramid

You may have read that the Internet changed everything about journalism and storytelling. You may have even read that in this book. But like most sweeping statements, it’s true and not so true. The Web with all its immediacy, its reach, its social networks, and new tools has changed the way we find stories, research stories, and structure and write stories. Some might argue that the Internet changes the very nature of story.

Oddly, perhaps even ironically, most observers first hypothesized that the endless space afforded by working online would make the classic hard news story a thing of the past. Not true.

Why? Well, the Internet brought both good and bad news for journalists and their audience. First, the good news. It offered unlimited space, a boon for every reporter forced to cut a great story because the news hole was too small (and that’s every reporter). It offered a huge audience who, the polls tell us, are getting more and more of their news online. According to a recent survey, about half of the people polled in the United States go online for their news, and Canadians are increasing their use of the Web for news (Reuters 2008; Canadian Media Research Consortium 2008).

Reading on the Web: Not Really Reading

The bad news is that surveys show that most people don’t read online. That’s right. They don’t read online. At least, not much. They scan.

Web design and usability expert Jakob Nielsen (1997) writes: “People rarely read Web pages word by word; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences. In research on how people read websites we found that 79 percent of our test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16 percent read word-by-word.”
Eye-scan research (where readers’ eye movements are tracked) consistently shows that people are looking for headlines and chunks of information they can easily digest. Not surprisingly, this means that traditional journalism skills—the ability to write brisk, informative headlines and clear, compelling leads and comprehensive, tight stories—are now, more than ever, extremely valuable.

**Figure 13.1** The inverted pyramid

Oddly, the writing structure that has for some time now been the object of scorn—the classic inverted pyramid—turns out to be the best “new” way to get online readers to read! (See Figure 13.1.) In fact, says Nielsen, the best online text is structured much like a good, tight, hard news story: He suggests that online writers stick to

- one idea per paragraph (users will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph)
- the inverted pyramid style, starting with the conclusion
- half the word count (or less) than conventional writing (Nielsen 1997)

So, even though space is unlimited online, the most effective text for most people is short. In other research, Nielsen (2008) suggests that, on average, users have time to read at most 28 percent of the words on screen, but much of the time they read only 20 percent.

Imagine, your audience is only taking in less than one-quarter of what you have written. Nielsen (2008) looked at the data and estimated that users spend, on average, about 60 seconds on a page containing 800 words (the average length of a typical columnist’s piece). Even allowing for a generous 200-words-a-minute reading speed, the average reader is taking in less than a quarter of what you have written. Nielsen thinks it’s even less: “More realistically, users will read about 20% of the text on the average page.”
How to Engage an Online Audience

Don’t despair. But ditch your illusions. Web pages jammed with text are very likely not being read. (There are exceptions: Some users will read certain stories almost no matter what the length. But the story has to be compelling, engaging, and rich with valuable and relevant content.) Nevertheless, there are solutions.

Keep in Mind That Less Is More

- **Rule number one:** Write tightly, cleanly, and economically. Forget about being paid by the word. Nobody will read flabby, bloated stories online.
- **Rule number two:** Cut useless verbiage. Or as online writing consultant Steve Krug (2000) puts it, “Happy talk must die” (46). This is the amateurish, chatty stuff that fills a lot of web pages. It usually begins, “Welcome …” and then goes on for several hundred words telling you … well, nothing. Reporters have a huge advantage here. We’ve been trained to cut the chat and get to the facts.
- **Rule number three:** It’s harder to write short than to write long. As Mark Twain famously said: “I didn’t have time to write you a short letter, so I wrote you a long one.”
- **Rule number four:** Cut. Cut. Cut. In his book *Don’t Make Me Think*, Krug (2000) advises writers to craft the piece. Then cut it. Mercilessly. His Third Law of Usability is, “Get rid of half the words on each page, then get rid of half of what’s left” (45). One way to do this is to use what’s been called the 20-20 rule. That is, readers tend to zone out if sentences go over 20 words and you can cut most of your sentences by 20 percent.

If you think this can’t be done, remind yourself that it is done every day—by editors. Broadcasters and wire service editors, in particular, are experts at this kind of compression. Canadian Press editors routinely take 400-word stories, turn them into 200-word stories, and then boil them down to wire service alerts and then down to headlines.

Here is a 180-word piece from the Canadian Dairy Commission website:

The Canadian Dairy Commission is a Crown corporation which was established in 1966 with the mandate of coordinating federal and provincial dairy policies and creating a control mechanism for milk production which would help stabilize revenues and avoid costly surpluses. The CDC plays a key role as facilitator and stakeholder in the various forums that influence dairy policy in Canada and offers a framework for the management of the industry as a whole, which is a jurisdiction shared by the federal government and the provinces.

Since supply management was first applied to the dairy sector, the CDC has been in charge of two of the three pillars of the system: support prices and market sharing quota. Once a year, the CDC sets the support price of butter and skim milk powder following consultations with industry stakeholders. These prices are used as a reference by the provincial milk marketing boards to establish the price of industrial milk in each province. The CDC also monitors national production and demand and recommends the necessary adjustments to the national production target for industrial milk.
Now here's one way to revise the piece so that it's less than half as long (78 words):

The Canadian Dairy Commission, established in 1966, is a Crown corporation that controls milk production and coordinates federal and provincial dairy policies.

The CDC oversees dairy policy and manages the industry. It governs:

- support prices
- market sharing quota

Each year, the CDC sets the price of butter and skim milk powder. These prices are used by the provincial milk marketing boards to establish the prices of industrial milk.

The CDC also monitors:

- national milk production
- demand
- production targets

Here's another version that's about half as long again (33 words):

The Canadian Dairy Commission.

Key Facts:

- Crown corporation founded in 1966
- Coordinates federal and provincial dairy production
- Governs support prices and market sharing quota
- Monitors national milk production and demand through supply management

Let Headlines and Blurbs Tell the Story

Because readers “scan” online rather than read, headlines and well-crafted leads become what’s called “microcontent” online. Users are often on a mission—they want to be updated on the news, find the answer to a specific question, or find information on which they can act (for example, “Is the swine-flu vaccine safe? Where can I get it?”). So, they scan pages looking for keywords and for content that contains information. The microcontent must be “content rich”—that is, the words must convey clear information.

So, a piece on Indian fashion might have a print headline, along with a deck (the sentence summarizing the story or providing additional information, and typically appearing below the headline), such as this:

**Whose sari now?**

Indian style hits North American runways this spring

In a print publication, the headline would run above or below a picture of Indian models on a runway or a series of pictures of new fashions from Mumbai. The play on words would be immediately understandable and funny. But online?

Can you see the problem? The web scanner reading from left to right sees no content words in the headline (and the lengthier deck would likely not appear online at all). As well, the play on words is unlikely to work online, and the lack of clear keywords will distract and confuse. Today, lots of folks read news headlines via
1. Google searches
2. RSS (whether they actually know they’re reading RSS feeds or not)
3. small screens (tablets, cellphones, smartphones, and other information appliances)
4. news aggregation tools
5. Twitter feeds with links
6. custom homepages like iGoogle

Imagine the same headline displayed on those platforms and interfaces. It would mean nothing. The online microcontent should instead read something like this:

**Indian fashions hit North American clothing market**
Bollywood style picked up by US designers

This headline drops the wordplay, has key content words on the left, and is information packed. Even on a small screen, users would know what the piece is about.

The other trick to online content is paying attention to the visual presentation of the story. Just as a good headline and strong photo can draw a newspaper or magazine reader into a story, so too the correct design of online content can spell the difference between a second-long scan followed by a quick click to another page and a user actually reading the piece.

**Chunking**
Chunking is essential to keep people reading. Because users scan, they can more easily digest “chunks” of information that the eye can quickly decipher. So, rather than present a block of grey text, break up your material using the following:

- headlines
- decks
- leads
- summaries
- subheads
- pull quotes
- lists
- tables
- links (Shewchuk and Mietkiewicz 2009, 68)

Using different fonts, and changing text size and even colour (sparingly and effectively), can all enhance the page and increase a user’s uptake of the content. As well, we have to acknowledge that users are often “seekers” rather than readers. That is, they are looking for discrete pieces of information. Answers to questions. Stats or facts.

Instead of burying your facts in densely written paragraphs, consider delivering the information in lists—numbered, lettered, or bulleted. These formatting devices break the text up visually and allow for easy “digestion” of the key points.

Similarly, it’s a good idea to parse your story into chunks. Doing so has two effects. First, it allows users to scan for subheads that interest them and dive directly into a
section. And second, it provides users with much needed visual variability. A good rule of thumb that I’ve used in creating web stories is to ensure that every “screen” has some kind of visual break—a subhead, a boldfaced pull quote, a photo, or some other graphic element. Nothing puts off people like screen after screen of grey text. Scrolling down through a mile and half of uninterrupted print will exhaust even an interested user.

Once you’ve broken your story into chunks, you need to “flag” those chunks in some way, that is, provide users with a clear indication of the parts of your story. You can do this by putting hyperlinks at the top or side of the story that will guide users directly into the piece. CBC.ca did a good job of this in Influenza: Battling the Last Great Virus. The series topic’s main web page provides users 24 entry points to dive into the story. See it here: archives.cbc.ca/health/disease/topics/1965/.

Editors chunk content and add headlines so that users can easily read any part of the story in any order. As a result, narrative control is relinquished to the user—which is a recent and challenging aspect of new journalism. Normally, reporters guide readers through material in some kind of chronological order ordained by the reporter and editors; read this, then read this, and then read this. But online, the control moves from the author to the user, and we must create stories that work that way. Links, clearly marked by informative headlines, allow users to move on to other material at any time. This last point leads us to the next great challenge of new journalism: structuring stories online.

**The Non-Linear Story, or the New Narrative**

The ability to “read” a story any old way you want is a new wrinkle engendered by the interface functionality of the Web. Sure, readers of a non-fiction book might dip into the introduction, then skip a few chapters, then read the end, but the author has a measure of control by laying out the book’s contents in a certain order and by crafting a narrative arc that guides readers through the material—particularly if the book is based on “story”—from beginning to end.

The nature of the online environment, to some extent, dismantles that structure (see Figure 13.2). For one thing, we have hyperlinks.

**Links, Links, and More Links**

Hyperlinks give users lateral connectivity to a story—the ability to move “sideways” in the story and jump over to another story in the series, to an internal sidebar, or out altogether to a separate website or story. As a journalist, how you apply hyperlinks to your story is crucial. Hyperlinks can be very effective for providing explanations, definitions, and background without slowing down your story. Overused (see most pages on Wikipedia!), they can distract, lose, or drive users crazy. You want your hyperlinks to enhance your story, providing depth, texture, and additional information without interrupting the flow of the story too much.

Here is a piece with way too many links. The interruptions in the flow of ideas are distracting.
**Truthiness** is a term first used in its recent satirical sense by American television comedian Stephen Colbert in 2005, to describe things that a person claims to know intuitively or “from the gut” without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts. [1] Colbert introduced this definition [2] of the word during the pilot episode of his political satire program The Colbert Report on October 17, 2005, as the subject of a segment called “The Word.” Truthiness was named Word of the Year for 2005 by the American Dialect Society and for 2006 by Merriam-Webster. [3] [4]

By using this “stunt word” as part of his routine, Colbert sought to satirize the use of appeal to emotion and the “gut feeling” as a rhetorical device in contemporary socio-political discourse. [5] He particularly applied it to U.S. President George W. Bush’s nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court and the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. [6] Colbert later ascribed truthiness to other institutions and organizations, including Wikipedia. [7] (Wikipedia n.d.)

As each user chooses different links, making a new path through the story, they are, in effect, creating a “new” story each and every time. No two users will have the same experience reading your story online.

This is even more true—and challenging—for the multipart story, series, or special report. Although the authors set out a structured set of text stories, audio, video, graphics, and interactives, it’s important to remember a number of facts:

1. Not everyone takes in the piece in the order you have suggested.
2. Not everyone lands on the homepage. People coming to your story through search engines may land in the middle of the series or project.
3. You must plan for users entering, experiencing, and exiting the project in myriad ways. How do you maximize their experience?

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**Figure 13.2** Linear and non-linear story structures

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Linear Story

- Beginning
- End

Non-Linear Story

- Main Story
- Links to the following:
  - External sites
  - Other pieces in a series
  - Audio, video, data
  - Background info
  - Related stories
- Story updates
- Reader feedback
- Corrections
Let Them Drive but Provide a Good Map

You can enhance a user’s experience by admitting one big fact: You are not in complete control of the story. Your user may watch all the video first; may read all the stories, but not in order; may check out the audio clips and then the photo gallery; or do any combination of the above.

The key for you is to structure the story in a way that allows users this flexibility without getting lost. How do you do that? By following web navigation conventions:

1. **Provide a clear map of the story.** Navigation should be designed to provide users with a clearly labelled list of links to all story parts. Remember to include this type of navigation on every page of your story to allow users to orient themselves in the story and to move seamlessly among its parts.

2. **Give users a sense of the size of your story.** Navigation should also provide users with a strong sense of the size and scope of your piece. Unlike a book that can be picked up and weighed, or a newspaper or magazine in which readers can easily see the story length, online stories can be deceptive. It’s up to you to provide a clear overview of the story so users are clear about how many parts or sections or chapters your story has.

3. **Never “dead-end” users.** Don’t let users get to the bottom of a story with no exit in sight. Forcing users to click on the “back” button to get around is an admission of structural defeat. Provide a navigation bar that contains links to the major parts of the story at the bottom or, at least, a series of links to “Related Stories” or “More Information.” Again, you are “guiding” your readers by providing suggestions for the next story or other stories, but remember that they’ll do whatever they please.

The CBC’s Indepth: Forces of Nature series is a good example of a well-mapped story. The right-hand navigation bar is clear and simple with all the subsections of the series, including Earthquakes, Flooding, and Forest Fires. See it here: www.cbc.ca/news/background/forcesofnature/index.html.

Make Each Part a Whole

Because users will move through your story in a number of ways, it’s important to make sure that the story’s pieces are comprehensible no matter how users arrive at them.

Rather than provide in every story a “nut graph” or “context graph” (that is, the nutshell paragraph that lays out the news value, broader relevance, or central topic of a piece—and something that print journalists were forced to do in multipart newspaper stories), you need to give users clearly labelled links to background and contextual sections of your story. Also, you can hyperlink keywords to a definitions or glossary page. Linking to original documents, reports, white papers, and other supporting evidence also saves space and adds depth to your story. If people want to see the original sources for your story, they can do so simply by clicking the link.

Many reporters include a section or link called “About This Series,” which provides an overview of the story parts and a brief backgrounder on the story and its authors.
The Key Structure Question: What Is the Best Way to Tell This Story?

Most of the discussion so far has been on how to make sure the story you are telling is clear, accessible, navigable, visually pleasing, and compelling. But before you take care of all those factors, you have to make an even more important structure decision about your story: What is the best way to tell it?

Of course, this used to be a non-question not long ago. Newspaper reporters used words and pictures, TV reporters used video and sound, and radio producers used words and sound to tell their stories. Even today, many legacy news organizations make the mistake of playing to their historical strengths—print, video, or audio—without considering the demands of the story. That’s not good enough anymore.

The CBC tackled this issue head on: “Although CBCNews.ca could be mostly audio and video files, this wouldn’t meet the demands of our web audience … Publishable words are at the heart of online journalism and that has major implications for the CBC and other broadcasters on the web” (Shewchuk and Mietkiewicz 2009, 52).

In a bold move, the Globe and Mail decided to use audio interviews with members of the Taliban to anchor its award-winning series Talking to the Taliban. (See Figure 13.3 for a screenshot of the series main page.) Although Graeme Smith is primarily a print reporter and the Globe’s legacy platform is the newspaper, this compelling story was told in audio, with photo galleries and text to support it.

![Talking to the Taliban](http://v1.theglobeandmail.com/talkingtothetaliban/.

**Figure 13.3** Talking to the Taliban


Similarly, the *Boston Globe* chose an audio slideshow format to tell Emily’s Story: Finding a Way at Harvard. (See Figure 13.4 below.) The story is told mainly through an audio slideshow, but it is augmented by photo galleries, audio clips, songs, and some video.

![Figure 13.4 Emily’s Story: Finding a Way at Harvard](http://www.boston.com/news/specials/emily/multimedia/)

The key to success now is to rethink the whole story process, from inception to research to information gathering and, finally, to writing and production. It's no longer good enough to go about the story in the same old way and then worry about “adapting” it to the online world.

Jonathan Dube, who writes about online journalism in his blog, CyberJournalist.net, says that you have to “think different” about journalism on the Web. Dube (2000a) writes: “Collaborate with audio, video and interactive producers. Develop a plan and let that guide you throughout the news gathering and production process, rather than just reporting a story and then adding various elements later as an afterthought. Look for stories that lend themselves to the Web stories that you can tell or differently from or better than in any other medium.”

Journalists may feel challenged by the seemingly unlimited number of media combinations they can now use to tell a story online. However, basic online storytelling forms are now fairly well established:
• Use text to explain.
• Use multimedia to show.
• Use interactives to demonstrate and engage. (Dube 2000b)

Of course, you can use any combination of these forms to tell your story. Dube (2000b) sets out the most common storytelling forms used by online news websites:

1. **Print plus:** This is essentially a print story or series of stories augmented by photos, charts, audio or video clips, interactives, et cetera. This form is widely used by newspaper websites; it plays off of their strength in print, but adds value with photos, maps, charts, and other helpful material.

2. **Audio:** Audio has become an extremely popular way to tell stories and inform. The podcast form (that is, downloadable recordings such as digital radio shows and audio documentaries) is often accompanied by supportive text transcripts, photos, and other material.

3. **Video:** Like the audio podcast, the video clip online can be an effective storytelling tool, although it's important to note that merely putting up five minutes of a talking head is not good. Online video stories are fast-paced, short, and often use a combination of text screen, narration, photos, and video footage to tell the story.

4. **Slideshow:** A slideshow is essentially a moving photo essay. Well suited to a story with strong visuals, the slideshow can showcase powerful images with crisp, tight writing in the captions.

5. **Narrated slideshow:** More like a slideshow on steroids, this form involves a series of powerful images augmented by narration, interviews, and sounds. As the photos move along, the audio plays with it and creates a documentary-style presentation.

6. **Multimedia interactives:** This is the name Dube gives to stories that use everything and the kitchen sink—text, photos, animations, clickable quizzes, polls, audio, video, slideshows, and pretty much anything else to create fully integrated “comprehensive interactive packages that tell stories in ways no other medium can” (Dube 2000b).

Obviously, the Web offers a vast array of tools and techniques with which to tell a story. Still, fundamentally, your story, whether in text, audio, video, animation, or a combination of media, must be well written. It must be structured to capture and hold the attention of users. It must be flexible and transparent enough to accommodate updates, changes, and corrections. It must engage with a human story, with solid facts, with compelling narrative, with high-impact information.

As well, it must respect the independence of users. They will access your story, read it, use it, enter it, exit it, and even add to it in ways you will have anticipated (you hope) and in some ways you may never have imagined. And that's okay.

Today, you must structure your stories, big or small, with users in mind. Journalism on the Web makes the writer–reader partnership complete; in many ways, the online story is now created and recreated each time it is read.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Outline the main medium you would use to cover the following stories. What would you use as secondary elements? Why?
   - a school board meeting
   - the annual rural fall fair
   - a local indie-band show

2. Go online and compare the coverage of the same story at three different sites, such as CBC.ca, globeandmail.ca, and thecanadianpress.com. What works? What doesn't? What would you change, add, or delete?

3. Revisit a story you have done recently. Redo the story in a different medium—audio, video, text, slideshow, et cetera. Did you improve the story? Did you change it significantly? Can you marry the two versions?

SUGGESTED RESOURCES


REFERENCES