

REPORTINGON.COM

A Summary Report
of a Creative Project

Presented to
The School of Journalism and Mass Communications
San José State University

by
Ryan Sholin
April 6, 2009

Purpose

If the work of journalism is to shed light on something otherwise unseen by the general public, then reporters work in the dark at their own peril. At a time in the history of mass communication when the means of communicating to the masses are in the hands of the general public themselves, reporters must commit the simple act of talking to each other to better their own stories. Rubbing elbows in the press room is nothing new — journalists on the same beat have passed tips or sources back and forth for decades, paying and repaying favors over the years. However, the speed of communication must increase between journalists with similar interests, beats, or angles on important stories taking shape in disparate communities.

The basic concept of this project is that everyone who answers the question "What are you reporting on?" in real time, in public, on the Web, has a chance to make connections with their topical peers, regardless of location, the size of their newsroom, or their social status in their field. That means added context to stories, smarter approaches to issues relevant to local readers, and an easier way to bring important trends to the surface of public discourse.

ReportingOn launched on October 1, 2008, with the goal of providing journalists of all stripes a place on the Web to find one another based on the topics they might be researching or covering at any given point in time. The service capitalizes on the excitement surrounding the social networking sphere and the example provided by Twitter, a microblogging service where users post short messages and interact with one another.

Background

When reporters exchange ideas on group e-mail lists or message boards that host discussions about their particular area of expertise, the conversation covers the craft of journalism, but rarely the content of the story. This is the way most current social networks for journalists function. SportsShooter.com is the de facto online headquarters for photojournalists, VisualEditors.com is a social network for print and multimedia designers, and WiredJournalists.com acts as a point of connection for reporters new to online journalism with those more experienced in the emerging craft. Participants on all three sites discuss methods and finished products, but journalists tend not to communicate with each other regarding the topic of their story while they are reporting and writing it. ReportingOn.com gives them a simple way to do so, without giving away the full details of their story.

The ReportingOn project follows Twitter in an effort to lower the barrier to communicating with strangers who have a common interest. From shorthand to instant messaging to text messaging over mobile phones, the abbreviation of communication has become a human habit. Twitter is no different. The core function of this Web service for an individual user is to provide a space for 140-character updates. Twitter's declared purpose is to give the user a space to update his or her "followers" on the answer to the question: "What are you doing?" However, the combination of short updates and ease of interacting directly and regularly with one another has enabled users of the service to form loose, casual networks with persons whom they otherwise may not communicate with on a direct or regular basis.

Method

Funded by a \$15,000 grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation as a winner of the Knight News Challenge in 2008, the student developed, designed, promoted, and launched ReportingOn.com. The site was built on the Django framework, a Web platform created by journalists and popular with Web developers at news organizations. Notable journalism projects built in Django include Everyblock, an aggregator of local information broken down into small geographic chunks; Ellington, a content management system designed for online news sites, and major database projects built at The Washington Post and The New York Times, among others.

To view screenshots of the original ReportingOn site, please visit <http://ryansholin.com/speaking/sjsuro> where this presentation and report will be archived.

The original site included:

- Authentication and user registration.
- User updates limited to 140 characters.
- User-created optional tags – or “beats” – on each update.
- Home page with a running, paginated list of recent updates posted by users, recent comments, and popular beats.
- User pages with a running list of the user's updates, profile information, recent comments posted by the user, and beats used by the user.
- Forms to edit and maintain user information, such as avatars and social networking information.
- Individual beat pages with a running, paginated list of recent updates posted in that beat by users.
- Individual update pages with comment threads and beats.
- A comment form on each single update page, allowing registered users to ask questions, answer them, and carry on conversations related to the update.
- A “tag cloud” for all beats.
- Feedback form for input from users, later switched to a hosted feedback solution at Uservoice.com.
- FAQ to serve as basic guidelines for posting.
- A blog detailing development progress.

Results

As of February 1, 2009, more than 1,000 users had signed up at ReportingOn. More than 400 updates had been posted, and more than 300 users had added avatars to their profiles. Users had created more than 500 tags. More than 6,800 visits had been made to the site since its launch on October 1, 2008, with a peak of 431 visits on October 3, gradually decreasing after that date with the exception of a spike on October 31, 2008, when 299 visits were made to the site, largely as a result of a mention of ReportingOn in a post at Mashable, a popular technology blog.

One of the unexpected results of this project has been the exposure of wide international interest in connecting across borders. As the student had witnessed previously in the media blogosphere, social networks, and Wired Journalists, a social network for journalists co-founded by the student, the depth and range of conversation about the changing form and function of reporting as it shifts to the Web is far greater in the United States than in most other countries, with the United Kingdom as a possible exception.

The second somewhat unexpected group of visitors to the site have been public relations practitioners. While the project is aimed at journalists, the student chose not to moderate registrations or limit registrations to professional reporters. In an effort to provide an inclusive service and promote ReportingOn, it became clear to public relations practitioners that the site provided a convenient way to find reporters who focus on a given topic.

Discussion

The student has begun the next stage of development of the ReportingOn project. As of February 1, 2009, a Web development and design team has been contracted to rebuild the project, largely from scratch, and produce the next generation of the site as well as open source code that can be released to the Django and journalism communities for improvement, adjustment, and further development. The feature set of the next phase of the project will shift the emphasis of the site from status updates to questions. Journalists will be invited to ask and answer questions, inspired in part by Stack Overflow, a similar tool for computer programmers.

Improving integration with existing online social networks has become an important goal for the project, as news organizations and individual reporters have dramatically increased their use of Twitter and other online means of connecting with their community and sources.

The first step in the long-term plan for ReportingOn will be to launch the next iteration of the network by June 15, 2009. If the redesigned site serves the needs of journalists hoping to connect with peers working the same sort of beat in other organizations, then the original objectives of the project will be realized. The student will most likely seek additional grants in 2009 and beyond to fund the continued development and promotion of the project.

Related Links

- <http://reportingon.com>
- <http://ryansholin.com/speaking/sjsuro>
- http://www.pbs.org/idealab/ryan_sholin
- <http://blog.reportingon.com>
- <http://twitter.com/reportingon>