

Winter 4-28-2020

Niche Journalism: Successful Steps in a Saturated, Modern Market

Arianna L. Smith
Wayne State University, gc0276@wayne.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/honorsthesis>

 Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), and the [Publishing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Arianna L., "Niche Journalism: Successful Steps in a Saturated, Modern Market" (2020). *Honors College Theses*. 63.
<https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/honorsthesis/63>

This Open Access Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Irvin D. Reid Honors College at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

Niche Journalism: Successful Steps in a Saturated, Modern Market

Arianna Smith

Wayne State University

ABSTRACT

“How-to” articles make up the bulk of an average Google search when initiating research on a new venture—the subject of self-publishing and propagating journalistic content is no exception. In this day and age, self-started publications are almost guaranteed to be niche in nature. With the intent to create a more academic and objectively reliable guide, this literature review takes into account the observations and conclusions of multiple communications professionals, long-and-short standing news organizations of varying success and notoriety, and studies concerned with the trends relating to audience engagement and technology integration to answer the main research questions thus: what is ‘niche’ journalism, and how does it relate to humanities reporting among underreported communities? In a rising market of so-called civilian and blogger journalism, one that is quickly reaching a critical point of digitized oversaturation, where is the comfortable boundary line between audience engagement and content corruption? What does functional niche journalism look like, design wise? Finally, what technological and organizational methods would provide the best return when implemented with the goal to hypothetically launch and sustain a successful niche publication?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Features and Niche Journalism

Foremost, one cannot begin to understand or research the proper way to target and disseminate a niche publication successfully without first understanding why features journalism is important to the general cycle of news and information. Journalism as a field and potential career has been decried as dying in recent times, so much that scores of journalism hopefuls leaving high school and entering college, upon voicing their projected path, get met with the classic and disheartening phrase that concerned parents and advisors often level at students seeking to become professional artists. ‘Are you sure about that? Are you even going to make money?’ This point of view is often accompanied by a general lack of knowledge about the depth and variety journalism as a field can have in itself, and this is because of a layman’s understanding that hard hitting news journalism need either be televised, purely digital, or otherwise obsolete.

This will be discussed in detail later, but primarily, the summation is that if hard news journalism is considered dying and unimportant by the layman who still rely heavily on it, then features journalism, which stereotypically covers a more soft and frivolous tone of news, is and has been viewed as less than worthless by those who have considered themselves academics and experts in the field. “This ‘featurization’ of journalism is generally portrayed by academics in a normative fashion. The general argument is that feature journalism represents a ‘dumbing-down’ of journalism. Franklin argues, for instance, that increased emphasis on feature journalism diverts journalism towards what might interest the public instead of what is in the public’s interest, hence weakening the role of the news media in a democracy” (Steens, 2). This is an insult to not only writers who find themselves drawn to the field of features and humanities

journalism, but also to the intelligence and depth of field of the readers who treasure those articles and or find themselves the subjects of them. The importance of objectivity and clarity of fact is not downsized in features journalism—conversely, it is strictly emphasized in exchange for a small amount of creative liberty with writing style and reader engagement.

Steven Steens, who favors instruction and mastery in features journalism, argues that it is necessary because “features journalism is related to concepts like genre, discourse and social function. It is an act of communication that seems to address a publicly recognized need to be entertained and connected with other people, on a mainly emotional level, by accounts of personal experiences that are related to contemporary events of perceived public interest” (Steens, 50). Features journalism requires just as much if not more research than some forms of harder or more purely objective news, as the majority of the information gained is not available readily to the general, stranger public, and relies on interpersonal connection to the subject, their passion and or subject, and whatever story and emotions lie therein. It can act as a respite for good news and also as an investigative tool to unearth large issues that go overlooked by broad scale coverage. “Local and features reporting by newspapers, more than any other journalistic offering, has survived it all—the advent of radio, television, cable, and even the Internet. It’s what kicked off the Watergate investigation. It’s what we do best. And it’s what readers love most” (Blackledge, 6).

With the importance and viability of features journalism established, one can begin to understand its more specialized and targeted form, niche journalism. Vehbi Gorgulu concisely defines niche journalism, or narrowcasting, as “the targeting of specific audiences. The concept has gained importance as the result of a shift from mass to personalized content facilitation, in particular, owing to the rapid development of new information and communication technologies

(ICTs) and the rising popularity of online social networks” (Gorgulu, 1). In the simplest of translations, readers increasingly want content that is as customized to their interests as possible, innovative and interesting, and finally easy to access. “These are publications with names like *ClimateWire*, *Energy Trader*, *Traffic World*, *Government Executive* and *Food Chemical News*. Their audiences vary, but most readers find the content increasingly important—even crucial—for their job, their business and their industry” (Pew, *The Rise of Niche*).

Who and What to Cover: Finding a Niche in an Oversaturated World

Content and Audience. To have a niche publication, one needs a niche to fill. Wide appeal is no longer the name of the journalistic game, so to speak. While arguments can be made that this isn’t an admirable trend for global and wide-spanning, hard factual news to indulge in, this is a hopeful sign for feature content. The Pew Research Journalism Staff went on in the above-mentioned study to profile the massively successful niche publication *Bloomberg News*, which focuses on financial and stock headlines and publishes highly targeted content to subscribers. The publication was established in 1990 with a team of six people. In 2010, *Bloomberg News* had hired more than “2,300 editors and reporters in 72 countries, and 146 news bureaus worldwide” (Pew). *Bloomberg News* has branched out into television, opinion and political commentary, but a large portion of its success is undeniably attributed to its incredibly targeted, elite audience. That would seem to be the first step to publishing a prosperous niche publication—locating and targeting the correct audience, one that meets the correct mixture of specific, essential, and with great potential to grow as a community. “Who do I want to write for?” should be the first of many self-reflected questions.

The second should then be “what do I want to write about?” Or rather, “what does my audience want me to write about?” Selecting the correct audience comes hand in hand with

selecting the correct content to cover. The content, if it's specialized and done well, will be what attracts the audience initially and (partially) holds their attention in the long run. Anne Lu states that "in niche journalism, relevance is requirement for content, and published information cannot be abstract or interesting simply for its own sake" (Lu, *How Niche Journalism*). Admirable content for a niche publication needs to be interesting and essential, and this can be a difficult balance to strike. That is the core of niche journalism and where it pinpoints the basic tenants of features journalism. It is presented as a quirky luxury when in reality it is an urgent, untapped need.

"*The Local* is an example we're familiar with. Their niche – aimed at English speaking expats living in Sweden – has been so successful that the model has been rolled out elsewhere in Europe" (Kuntze, *Do Niche Publications Think Differently*). According to Kuntze's article, *The Local* gives its readers essential and previously uncovered information about living in their chosen country, such as how to deal with unfamiliar taxation systems, navigate elections, rent a place to live, etcetera. This is a good example of a successful niche publication-- something specialized, essential, not widely available on the generalized web or in the generic public, and moderately or severely lacking in attention. The content makes up one half of the niche; the audience makes up the other.

Aaron Elstein from *Crain's New York Business* further elucidates this trend with his comparison of larger, more generalized "soft-feature" media sites like *Buzzfeed* and *Huffington Post* that have seen larger than anticipated losses for their business and reporting model.

"*BuzzFeed* laid off 43 of its approximately 250 journalists last month, obliterating its national news desk while cutting back coverage of national security, health care and entertainment. The *Huffington Post* lost 20 journalists, including its entire opinion and health sections. It was sold

for scrap” (Elstein, *Despite Buzzkill at BuzzFeed*). Jacob Nelson told a similar story with his analysis of the *Chicago Tribune’s* features department, saying that it instructed its writers to choose its story content based with the most generic, wide sweeping audience in mind as possible. In doing so, they turned their department into a jack of all trades, or genres, and a master of none of them. This leads to a large majority of the lukewarm reader response these publications receive to what they think is targeted content, and large lapses in judgement and knowledge when they attempt to further sharpen their too-wide gazes. “By prioritizing content that will appeal to a large audience, *Tribune* editors sometimes overlook the preferences of large subsets of that audience” (Nelson, *And Deliver Us to Segmentation*).

On the other hand, Elstein points out that niche publications like *Reorg Research*, a media outlet that provides analysis about corporate restructurings and bankruptcies to around 20,000 subscribers, saw “revenues reach[ed] about \$34 million in 2017 (Elstein). Appealing to the masses is a strategy that is proving less and less stable when it comes to features and niche journalism.

Tone. Niche journalists are writing to cater to a select readership which might not be large in number but have the motivation and money to pay for useful information. A hard news tone, one disseminated with at best, cold objectivity and at worst, perfunctory and light-handed treatment, would obviously be the wrong route for a niche publication to take with an audience that expects palpable care for the subject matter. “Niche journalism audiences tend to be narrow, yet deep. So too should the tone one takes when addressing them. A specialist approach elevates niche publishers into thought leaders who are educated on their subject and do genuinely care about their target publics” (Lu). Fishkeeping and aquarium hobbyist publications are good examples of this. Information is highly specified, verified, and factual discourse is taken as

seriously as any globally breaking news peg. The overall tone, however, is welcoming and helpful. The consensus is that the best tone for a hypothetical niche publication would be from the point of view of an amicable authority; an expert in the field who is friendly and attentive with the way they interact with their base of readers.

“*Culture Trip* has been regarded as the place to get information about destinations since it started in 2015, but it’s predicated on a simple philosophy which underpins everything they do: their readers want to travel like locals, not tourists” (Kuntze, *Do Niche Publications Think Differently*). Kuntze attributes the success of *Culture Trip* to the way they approach their subject matter, not just their niche content focus. They aren’t only factual; they present their information to readers in a novel and reciprocal manner. Regardless of whether the writers for *Culture Trip* are actually locals from the venues they report on, their cultural fluency and writing styles meet the criteria of quality and authority on the subject so much so that they excel at the niche branding, and their readers feel confident and at an advantage after engaging with the publication. Information should be discussed and reviewed with a fine-toothed comb, and that comb should be wielded with personality.

These conclusions plainly underline why niche journalism should be handled with a features tone and mindset, rather than a purely neutral news outlook that demands the removal of all or most emotion. “Quite aside from the content itself, notable niche work can often be traced back to a personal moment in the authors lives or professional experience, shared. As a reader this can be quite compelling. It’s another way to build trust – though admittedly not something that could be replicated in other organizations by the very nature of the writing style” (Kuntze).

Design: What Form (Visual, Innovative) does Modern, Relevant Niche Design Take?

In traditional forms of features journalism, mainly magazine and newspaper print, the concepts of design and layout are as integral to the delivery of stories and articles as the content itself, at least in the eyes of readers. In 2020, despite the more mundane aspects of antiquity still being important to the craft, design has grown into more than centering headlines and scaling font sizes. Like many aspects of journalism, design hasn't escaped becoming a multisided hurdle in the age of modern platforms and technology that evolves seemingly by the week. Going with current market trends for this scenario and assuming that the chosen platform for our hypothetical niche publication is online media and web copy, the selected design formula should fulfil a set of criteria that Ana Serrano describes as "Effective Cybergenre Design: interactivity, navigability, usability and accessibility. Design is a concept that includes the utility or function of the product... [on the] internet this function includes several: to be seen, heard, discussed, shared, posted, immersed, and browsed" (Serrano, *Online Journalism*). Every aspect of niche journalism is a more streamlined version of features journalism—the design must be intimate and tailored to match the content carried by the publication.

Multimedia and Format. According to design academics, design and layout for a niche publication needs to "constantly surprise the user to retain their loyalty, increase reader participation and emphasize the exclusive content on display" (Serrano), all while being uniquely creative overall. Creativity that flourishes under the limitations of cyberspace and the needs of a publication to produce distinguished, conspicuous, attractive design would likely be ideal for a niche publication with a particular audience and distinct content. With traditional online copy for niche publications, the best interface is one that appears to be as intimate and responsive as

possible. “When a reader looks at a publication, they want to feel like it was designed with their eyes and attention span in mind. Cleverly incorporated media, like hypertext, graphics, video, animation and sound, and hyperlinking can create new forms of digital storytelling, which then surprise, delight and puzzle readers” (Pope, *Further on Down*). Design elements shouldn’t be window dressing to a story. They should take an active role in delivering the story to the reader, and this should be the answer to the next question regarding the hypothetical niche publication; “What design formula would be most effective for my readers?” The following section will be a brief overview of services, software and technology that can be incorporated with creative aesthetic to suit a variety of niche brands.

Hypertext and Layering. Hyperlinks and hypermedia are well established digital design elements that add layers to static web copy and have done for years. The main premise of a hyperlink is to redirect the reader towards another aspect of the story or to reference an outside resource. These aspects are typically videos, images, soundbites or other forms of media that are incorporated to create a more complete and satisfying narrative. “Hyperlinked media may be a dated technology by origin, but they can still be a great example of how new media can do things traditional media can’t. Only if, however, they provide ease of accessibility for the reader or viewer, and make effective use of interactive elements” (Pope). In the early days of web design, hyperlinks were a very rudimentary technology. They often pulled readers away from the article and the platform altogether and made for a broken immersion experience overall. Thankfully, hyperlinks and hypermedia have been tweaked into a more sophisticated form in recent times and interact seamlessly, in most cases. James Pope’s analysis of reader response and feedback to hypermedia indicates that online viewers would appreciate an immersive, wide-ranging

experience to be contained in a neat, professional ecosystem. “The less seams and transitions visible to the viewer, the better” (Pope).

Hypermedia in 2020 primarily appears as tagged images (images featuring pinned, embedded elements contained attractively on the image face itself) created via graphical tools like [ThingLink](#), XIA, and [Genial.ly](#). The definition of an interactive image then expands to maps, infographics, eCommerce presentations, product marketing and more. Tagged media allows for the sense of movement while allowing the reader to remain visually ‘seated’ and comfortable. ThingLink and Genial.ly especially boast 360 AR/VR compatibility, for the creation of tours and instructional experiences rather than simple videos. “Readers and viewers want to be able to move around an interactive space freely in order to apprehend the developing narrative, while also not being yanked all around the internet. An abundance of tabs is a headache for anyone” (Pope). On the back end, ThingLink’s images have an option that can be enabled for them to provide real-time statistical data from audience engagement and assist publishers in tailoring their visuals. Highly customizable, these plugins and additions can be crafted to deliver an intimate story experience for readers of even the narrowest niche.

Photomaps (Cartographic and Graticular). These days, visual design elements in award winning niche publications need to be more than static images lying flat on a page. Readers want to be engaged by images and be enveloped in the story. Photomaps, or multiple viewpoint photo composites, shift geographic visualization and add depth to images and galleries. Photomaps build worlds and biomes with dimension, using illusion and design principle, to bring artistic elements of stories to life. “Photomaps are commonplace, but critically and popularly overlooked. Well-known examples include the ubiquitous panorama and aerial composites such as Google Maps’ satellite view as an extremely practical application” (Tovey,

Photomaps). Rob Tovey points to cartographic and graticular mapping—a sphere, like a panoramic image or globular surface plotted to a flat surface— as particularly effective methods for integrating photomapping with storytelling efforts. An image of a hall of mirrors, for example, can be split and reoriented around a textual walkthrough of the exhibit to create a dazzling effect through reflection and optical illusion or a carousel divided into graticular lobes (“where a spherical image is sliced into 12 double pointed ovals, minimizing distortion while preserving angles between points and staggering the effect of visual interruptions”) [Tovey, *Photomapping*], can be digitally opened, section by section, like a book or flyer. Fluid images and photography also combine well with appealing hyperlink and media design.

Sound Slides/Tracks. While less integral to the impact of written word, sound design can also influence the overall experience a niche publication. Playing audio during longform, sectioned articles or packages often underlines the gravity and intimacy of the subject matter, particularly with stories and articles with cultural or atmospheric importance. A good example of this would be the embedded soundtrack of *Children in the Congo*, which Martin Engelbretson discusses in his sound slides study. “The soundtrack for *Children in the Congo* consists of three separate elements of singing, apparently recorded “on location” with some realistic noise in the background, providing a background of shifting moods for the images and a shifting verbal contextualization” (Engelbretson, *The Sound Slide Report*).

The first minute of *Children in the Congo* is a happy school song sung by children that slowly slows and softens into a melancholy working song, sung by a young woman, that then turns into a lullaby cut with natural clips of dialogue and community life in the background. The songs are timed to the sections where they hold relevance and trigger automatically when the reader engages with the page. It adds mood and ambience to the information, as Engelbretson

states; “Any attempt to browse the sound slide report *Children in the Congo* without sound leaves you with a feeling of interacting with a completely different work. The work loses an important element of cohesion, as the songs create a wholeness that counteracts the fragmented impressions offered by the photos” (Engelbretson).

Launch and Audience Engagement

Web VS Print. With a design formula chosen and decided on, the next and final questions that the hypothetical niche publisher should approach is how and where they want their content to launch. “In the most recent study by the Pew Research Center for People and The Press, 65% of people ages 18-29 get their news from the internet, outpacing television for the first time. 47% of American adults say that read most of local and global news on their cellphone and tablet computers” (Grueskin, 11). Debates rage about whether physical print remains a viable, financially successful outlet for news media organizations. The answer varies depending on which sets of circumstances exist in a scenario and location, including the genre of content and news offered as well as online availability in the region, but the general conclusion among journalistic academics is that for better or worse, audience interest will continue to migrate to the digital sphere. Niche journalism, as a subset of humanities reporting that by nature conforms to what its audiences want, inevitably models those trends, as Lu writes; “Given the current digital climate where all kinds of information is available to the reading public free of charge, the survivors that have managed the transition to the web are turning to niche journalism to thrive. They are using the online platform as a way to reach more readers while creating fresh new ways to deliver content to paying subscribers who are eager for more” (Lu). As such, for the purpose of this review, digital media will continue to be the assumed best module for a collection of self-published niche content.

Funding and Business Model. Design and intriguing concept will not build, sustain and sell a niche publication by themselves, unless the goal is to disseminate the information for free. Expansion of the digital sphere translates to less gatekeeping in the realm of distribution. Today, a news organization doesn't need an entire team of coding experts and IT workers to build a customized website or platform. Website creation costs nothing with the introduction of do-it-yourself sites like Wix, Squarespace and WordPress. New niche publications are very easy to start with very little starting revenue or notoriety if a publisher intends to begin small and measured. Using similar self-publishing platforms like Soundcloud and Amazon Library, authors, musicians and creatives have carved their own niches in their respective fields and genres. "Do not let the lack of a commercial price structure fool you—WordPress is a world class publishing platform. It's an open source platform with developers from all over the world constantly updating, building plugins and widgets that make the CMS increasingly powerful" (Briggs, *Journalism Next*).

In his article for The Knight Foundation, Mark Glaser identified a motley of grant organizations and nonprofit groups that are dedicated to providing startup funding for new self-published news and media outlets that need assistance with either opening or expanding their operations. In his writeup, he briefly mentioned the grant practices of the American Journalism Project, the Lenfest Institute for Journalism and the Local News Business Model Challenge. His assertion that these large grants can mean the difference between success and failure may ring slightly biased and dramatic in the age of nearly no restrictions to content creation, but the option to seek funding and help is always incredibly valuable to up and coming niche journalists. "Keep your eye on the News Revenue Hub, a great resource for news organizations trying to keep their

head above water. The Hub offers a suite of services, including donation processing, in-depth analytics, marketing campaigns and training—and many of the services are funded by foundations” (Glaser, *How to Build*).

A study by Sirkkunen and Cook examined online markets worldwide in order to simulate the best business plan and prolonged operations model for a proposed niche publication. They concluded that in an American online market, an admirable strategy would be to begin with a small team, a focused content goal and a tight pool of targeted audience members on which to build a stable base. That stable base becomes the subscribers that pay to be part of the niche. As word spreads, so does the subscriber base. “There’s very little promise in citizen contributions if you’re running a small, niche web site. Contributions are sporadic and the one-man-publisher editor model seems to create most of the stories by themselves. Niche sites seem to enjoy strong community support, which can be backed up with financial support” (Sirkkunen and Cook, 28). They discussed the business model of the niche publication ArtsJournal, which was established in 1999 and is an aggregator of cultural news. According to Sirkkunen and Cook, ArtsJournal employs the founder and CEO Douglas McLennan, his assistant, and 66 bloggers in their network, as well as a full-time manager. With a staff of 69 people, they make “over six figures” (28), with half of the money coming from advertising and the other half through speaking engagements.

Audience Engagement. The final aspect for a hypothetical niche publisher to address is how and where they want to engage their audience—or not, which is also an option although not a recommended one. “Whether news and niche outlets require subscriptions or provide content for free, they must constantly interact with—and provide relevancy to—their audiences. Ensuring the attachment of a loyal audience is paramount” (Batsell, 8). The audience is, as previously established, the backbone of any web or print based niche publication. It probably is

best to engage and include them, and indeed it should be relatively easy to make initial connection if the publication is running on an interpersonal basis. Aside from compiling an email list, what degree of contact and interaction is appropriate and or necessary for a niche publication? The correct answer may be some, but not too much. Audiences are often allowed to provide suggestions for niche publications to cover, and they should stay suggestions, not mandates, so as to uphold ethics contamination in content. Audiences should never be allowed to direct or interfere with day-to-day content vetting and sourcing, and social media engagement should be cordial, polite, while remaining respectfully withdrawn.

Granted, that can be difficult to do with today's audiences. Nelson's article addresses the pitfalls that often come with involving large online communities in public discourse; "While some publication staff described taking steps to communicate with readers via in-person events or social media platforms, others were so discouraged by the vitriol they found in online comments to their articles that they admitted they rarely even looked at them. They admitted to incidents where, while infrequent, members of the audience had either angered or scared them" (Nelson). While there is always a chance for this to occur, the highly specialized nature and tight knit community surrounding niche content, the odds are significantly lessened. Later in Nelson's study, he acknowledges that further interviews with reporters and editors revealed that those who did make efforts to interact with their audience, despite some negative feedback, felt more positive about interactions that occurred in more intimate or offline venues, like niche sites and publications.

Jake Batsell is of the mind that fostering an audience is more than texting them weekly and asking them to pay for content. In his book *Engaged Journalism*, Batsell recommends that new niche publishers find methods to convene and meet their public in person, empower their

audiences to satisfy and supplement their own knowledge and curiosity through the publication, and put forth an effort than can be felt. “Feigned, shallow engagement” (Batsell, 34) is apparently worse than no effort at all.

Case Study: The NewsCube. What Worked, What Didn't?

Readers will always appreciate creative, appealing page visual and intriguing ways to manipulate multimedia. But as platforms evolve and marketing teams come up with new ways to engage attention, interactive customization continues to gain interest. “It is clear that readers have become more familiar with interacting in a wide range of ways: exploring the screen, clicking, pinching and swiping through pages on apps and websites are now very intuitive actions, almost becoming ‘trivial’” (Pope, *Further on Down*). This raises a complex dilemma for niche publication designers and publishers. Until a new technology is created that completely changes the way readers interact with web media, readers demand new configurations of the same technology that they've become intimately familiar with. Serrano describes this phenomenon as “newspapers on demand, an age where the ideal news platform needs to be curated, personalized, bite-sized [or at least appear to be, tangentially] and easily interchangeable for new, similar information with the least process possible” (Serrano).

The NewsCube, a prototype niche news platform and publication combination, seemed to address these concerns, and while it ultimately failed to make large waves before the official project ended, it stands as an incredible example of how a new niche publication might attempt to integrate truly innovative technology and intimate design to stand out in the market. The NewsCube was created in 2014 by “journalist and academic” (NewsCube) Sky Doherty as an interactive storytelling tool that pushed the boundaries of conventional screen engagement. The project aimed to make a creative leap in how news consumers used and experienced hyperlinks

to tell journalistic stories and was marketed as an interface that could be adapted to the design and branding any media outlet or organization. “In this study, a prototype iPad application was developed. It was designed to exploit hypertext in a way that allows readers or users to quickly glimpse the components of a complex or long-running story, and to vary the perspective within stories. A distinctive characteristic of the approach was that the design process was informed by journalism. That is, it was journalistic thinking combined with design methods” (Doherty, *The NewsCube*).

Using technologies similar to photomapping methods discussed by Tovey, with a NewsCube, a story or collection of content would be displayed on six joined surfaces that would take the shape of a singular, spinning cube, and that content would be grouped by genre or theme on each side, with nine slots of content able to be displayed independently or as a unit. That content could either be text, images, video, links, articles, documents or social media feeds. The physical prototype resembled a blank Rubik’s cube, with panels that could be changed and manipulated by the publisher via the accompanying iPad app. Eight prototypes of the NewsCube were digitally produced and published. Disregarding slightly clunky 2014 -era graphics, the cubes were reviewed to be aesthetically pleasing and fun to use. Prototypes 2-8 were able to be physically spun and turned with the click of a mouse, and each side of the cube featured either a graphical element, a headline, or both. The overall package came across as orderly and approachable, tangible even in a digital space in the way that hypermedia creates the appearance of movement around content and images. “The tactile, engaging qualities of the NewsCube were seen as an advantage by most of the participants. They noted the familiarity of the interface and called it ‘fun’ and ‘playful’” (Doherty). By the time the project ended in 2015, the NewsCube was awarded the 2014 Walkley Grant for Innovation in Journalism.

How The NewsCube Could be Improved

Juho Ruotsalainen compiled a study with Sirkka Heinonen that concluded; “attractiveness becomes a core quality criterion in cutting-edge journalism. Unlike in routine reporting, when journalists treat all subjects in a deep, interested, and engaging way, oftentimes attractiveness and engagement stem from novelty, freshness and originality” (Ruotsalainen, *Intimate Journalism*). The NewsCube was successful as a storytelling tool because while it was attractive, that attractive aesthetic served an actual, innovative purpose. There were notable areas in which the NewsCube could’ve been improved, however. Had the project not been primarily research and community driven and then intentionally, freely distributed, certain factors could have been tweaked in ways that could’ve elevated the NewsCube into an indispensable storytelling tool for niche publications, utilized financially by at least one successful outlet.

Negative feedback about the NewsCube related primarily to collaboration, point of view and breadth of topic. A public private button enabled users to make their NewsCubes visible and able to be edited to other participants, although that was never implemented fully, and the cubes possessed the ability to incorporate a personal social media stream on one of the faces.

Reviewers expressed concern about the quality and fact-checked status of the news they’d view if everyone in the wide online community was able to edit the content carried by the cubes; “I think if you had streams where every man and his dog had the equal ability to influence what it would look like, it would be unwieldy and it would be a mess” (Doherty). If the NewsCubes were repurposed by a niche publication, one crafted and disseminated by a small team of specialists and editors who removed the ability for the cubes to be edited post release, the quality of content would be above reproach and free of outside corruption—the dreaded ‘fake news’ dissolution.

Other criticisms of the NewsCubes consisted of complaints that design couldn't facilitate storytelling from multiple perspectives on the content featured because of its size and compact nature. There were mixed views on how effective the tool was for fair and objective reporting. One participant thought the cube was a rudimentary way to deal with perspective, as "sometimes you have in-betweens, and too many views could be confusing" (Doherty). Reviewers also reported that they were too generalized, and the platform was too small to be effectively used by large, established news communities who want a dearth of content. "Like everything else designed by a committee, it would not be very satisfying, because it would have the goal of satisfying everyone. Ultimately, cubes produced by larger companies would be a game won by the special interests, people who are paid to promote a point of view" (Doherty).

Again, adapting the NewsCube interface to a purely niche brand would eliminate those issues relating to point of view and content. For example, a niche publication for owners of Betta Splendens, a popular pet fish, would do well with a contained NewsCube interface. Five of the six sides could be designated for highly specialized, controlled and vetted content that the majority of the narrow community would agree on- advice on setting feeding schedules, or newly discovered changes to expected water parameters while using certain products. One or more of the sides could be gallery or image driven stories, featuring hypertext and interactive media, and the entire package could be delivered via email to paying subscribers, or possibly reworked into a tactile desktop or search bar application. This application would be customized to each users habits and preferences, with a social media stream on one side for increased intimacy and curation—a constantly spinning hub of personalized niche news. The panels could be set to show a variety of information from one niche, or a few selected headlines from one or two interested fields and communities.

The NewsCube was designed to be utilized by a large and varied market, but it could've had real success as a targeted, curated stream of niche news that would have quickly become an everyday staple in people's media routines.

REFERENCES

- Batsell, Jake. *Engaged Journalism: Connecting with Digitally Empowered News Audiences*. Columbia University Press, 2015.
- Blackledge, Brett J. *Newspapers' Niche: 'Dig deeply into local matters': '... the purpose of local reporting is to cover what others can't, won't or haven't*. *Nieman Reports* (0028-9817), 61 (4), p. 6. (12/22/2007).
- Briggs, Mark. *Journalism next: A Practical Guide to Digital Reporting and Publishing*. SAGE Publications, Inc., 2020.
- Doherty, Skye. *NewsCubed*. *Journalism practice* (1751-2786), 10 (5), p. 569. 2016
- Doherty, Skye. *The NewsCube*. NewsCubed, 3 Feb. 2016, newscubed.com/tw-portfolio/create/.
- Elstein, Aaron. *Despite buzzkill at BuzzFeed, some news sites' fortunes are improving; Niche titles on the rise as consumer brands struggle..* *Crain's New York Business*, 35(5), 0008. 2019, February 4
- Engebretsen, Martin. *The Soundslide Report: innovative journalism or misplaced works of art?* *Nordicom review* (1403-1108), 35 (1), p. 99. 2014.
- Glaser, Mark. *How to Build a Sustainable Local News Organization*. Knight Foundation, knightfoundation.org/articles/how-to-build-a-sustainable-local-news-organization/.
- Gorgulu, Vehbi. *Narrowcasting or Niche Journalism*. *The International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies*. 1-5. 2019

- Grueskin, Bill, et al. *The Story So Far: What We Know About the Business of Digital Journalism*. Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Kuntze, Em. *Do Niche Publications Think Differently about Their Audiences?* Content Insights, 28 Aug. 2019, <https://contentinsights.com/what-can-niche-publications-teach-us-about-audiences-attention/>
- Lu, Anne. *How Niche Journalism Is Keeping Publishing Alive*. International Business Times AU, 8 June 2016, www.ibtimes.com.au/how-niche-journalism-keeping-publishing-alive-1518433.
- Nelson, Jacob L. *And Deliver Us to Segmentation*. Journalism practice (1751-2786), 12 (2), p. 204. 2018
- Pew Research Center Journalism Staff. *The Rise of Niche*. Pew Research Center's Journalism Project, Pew Research Center, 31 Dec. 2019, www.journalism.org/2009/07/16/rise-niche/.
- Pope, James. *Further on down the Digital Road: Narrative Design and Reading Pleasure in Five New Media Writing Prize Narratives*. Convergence, vol. 26, no. 1, Feb. 2020, pp. 35–54
- Ruotsalainen, Juho, and Sirkka Heinonen. *Intimate Journalism*.
- Serrano Tellería, Ana. *Online Journalism and Design Thinking*. 2017.
- Sirkkunen, Esa and Clare Elizabeth Cook. *Chasing Sustainability on the Net: International research on 69 journalistic pure players and their business models*. 2012
- Steensen, Steen. *The Featurization of Journalism*. Nordicom Review (1403-1108). 2011

Tovey, Rob. *Photomaps: A Visual Taxonomy*. *Visual Communication*, vol. 17, no. 2, May 2018,
pp. 209–220