

1-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Fatima, Sahar, "Telling scholarly stories: Translating research outcomes into multimedia stories for the purposes of dissemination" (2012). *Journalism Publications and Research*. Paper 4.
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Telling scholarly stories: Translating research outcomes into multimedia stories for the purposes of dissemination

by

Sahar Fatima

An essay completed in partial fulfilment of the requirements of an
Undergraduate Research Opportunity Award

Ryerson University

September, 2012



Introduction

Universities have always focused on research, but the dissemination of research results beyond the scholarly community is often less of a priority (Armstrong, 2011) and poses serious challenges for scholars. Research is regularly published in books and in specialized scholarly journals, but both are expensive and often not readily available to the general public. The presentation of research papers at scholarly conferences is also problematic in that audiences tend to be limited to other scholars.

Lack of ready access to up-to-date research results means that individuals, communities and sometimes even government policy makers do not have the information they need for decision-making purposes. Moreover, students' preoccupation with day-to-day studying and their focus on class-related work means they too are often unaware of advances in knowledge and the work professors do in their role as researchers in the academy.

To address the challenge of making research results available to a wider audience, my Undergraduate Research Opportunity award focused on the creation of multimedia journalism stories for a research-focused website. Ryerson University School of Journalism professor

April Lindgren's [Local News Research Project](#) was used as the test case.

Media outlets regularly report on new research, presenting it in a way that is easy for audiences outside of scholarly communities to understand. This paper argues that combining the Internet's wide reach and multimedia capabilities with journalistic storytelling is an elegant solution to the problem of research

dissemination. In addition to making various aspects of research available to a potentially huge audience, this approach ensures the information is presented in a way that is easily digestible for students, other scholars

and the general public. Since it is standard practice for journalists to seek reaction to the latest news, translating scholarly articles and reports into stories that include reaction is also an opportunity to engage communities, including those who are most directly affected. Finally, a research-related website is also useful as a place to publish and publicize reports and other research documents that, due to scope or focus, may not be suitable for inclusion in traditional scholarly journals or books.

Background

The dissemination of scholarly research poses a challenge for many disciplines. The most common form of research dissemination in the Humanities and Social Sciences are articles and conference papers.

“The dissemination of scholarly research poses a challenge for many disciplines”

In both cases, this limits the audience primarily to other academics (Bazeley, 2006).

Scholarly journals are particularly problematic because they are often expensive to download from journal sites on the Internet and only available to users for free through libraries. With a few notable exceptions, the journals themselves do little to publicize the contents of their publications. This limited circulation means the results of major studies often go unremarked and are not generally available.

This is less than desirable for a variety of reasons. One consequence is that policy makers and decision makers may be unaware of or lack access to the best, most-up-to-date information as they go about their work. The general public, meanwhile, is uninformed about the contributions of scholars to state-of-the-art knowledge, a situation that undermines support for research endeavors at post-secondary institutions. Finally, the limited dissemination of research means taxpayers – who foot the bill for many scholarly investigations through publicly funded government research grants – often end up with little or no access to research outcomes.

The fields of science and healthcare have a particular problem translating research into

practice. In their research on the decreasing productivity of degraded lands, for instance, Seely, Klintenberg and Kruger (2009) found that the extensive research on the subject is not usually accessible to the policy makers and community groups actually involved in addressing desertification and the degradation of drylands. Researchers Kerner and Hall (2009) conclude that such gaps are due at least in part to passive diffusion practices in the science community that tend to be limited to word of mouth or the publication of results in journals and books with limited circulation. This slows the process of integrating that research into practice. They suggest that more proactive mechanisms designed to

reach a wide array of disciplines would be a better alternative for disseminating research (Kerner & Hall, 2009). I believe journalism is one such mechanism.

In this Undergraduate Research Opportunity

project we argue that adopting a journalistic approach to the presentation of research results on the Internet allows researchers to tell their own stories to a broader public.

The great advantage of taking a web-based journalistic approach to the dissemination of research is that it provides widespread access to results, methodologies and other aspects of scholarly investigation in language that is readable and easily

“The general public, meanwhile, is uninformed about the contributions of scholars to state-of-the-art knowledge”

understood. It is unlikely, for instance, that many people would devote significant amounts of time to reading the Local News Project's lengthy research paper on portrayals of disadvantaged areas in the *Toronto Star* (Lindgren, 2009). They might, however, read the researcher's much shorter [op ed piece](#). It is

accompanied by an audio clip from an interview I did with Evon Reid, a former Malvern resident, who talks about how the negative news reporting about his neighbourhood affected him. [In 2007](#), Reid was described as a "ghetto dude" in an email mistakenly sent to him by the person dealing with his application for a job with the Ontario government.

The packaging of this interview with Professor

Lindgren's op ed piece helps readers connect the issue of geographic stigmatisation to a real example of its

consequences. It also helps the dissemination process in that Reid himself, as a well-connected community member, was made aware of the research and the research website.

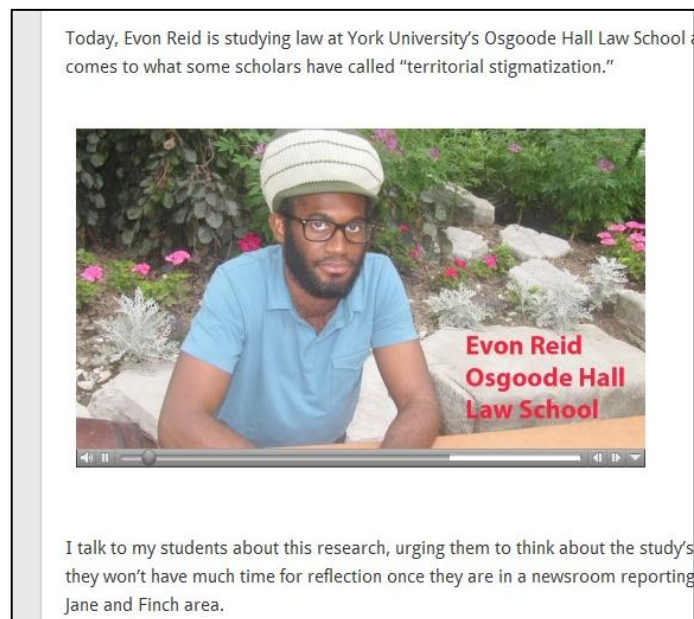
In another example that illustrates the multiple ways the web can be used to disseminate research, I also reported on Professor Lindgren's

presentation on the importance of local news to a meeting of the [National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada](#).

Interviews I did with representatives of the ethnic media who attended the presentation were included in my story. In

two cases I also post audio clips along with the subjects' photographs. The [interviews](#) prompted participants to ask about where the interviews would appear – again leading them to the research website

and other work by the Local News Research Project.



The Internet advantage

Many scholarly articles and journals can be found on the Internet (Thelwall, 2002), which suggests that researchers and journal publishers do recognize the web's potential as a source of fast, easy access to information. Unfortunately, except in the case of open-access journals, few papers are accessible for free. Posting stories, photos and commentary about research studies on a public website as we have done in this experiment is one way to make the results available beyond the academy to those who are not willing or able to pay for and download the original publications.

There are also advantages to using various web features that are not available in print documents. Stories about newly published research can be quickly published online and this also allows us to directly link readers to related sources (Thelwall, 2002) including the original publication. A research website is also a forum for posting content that hasn't been peer-reviewed, such as essays and articles by the researcher and research assistants.

Publishing online means that we can include a variety of multimedia components to help explain the research. Videos, audio clips and data charts within a web post give readers a break from reading, and offer another opportunity to deepen their understanding of the topic.

One final advantage of a well-designed website with content presented in various journalistic forms is that journalists in mainstream media may see the site, develop a better understanding of the research because it is presented in a jargon-free manner, and then do a story for their own news organizations. In terms of dissemination, this is a major coup.

The Local News Research Project website and content

The [Local News Research Project website](#) tackles the challenge of research



dissemination by combining journalism story-telling techniques and the world-wide reach of the Internet. The website features Professor Lindgren's studies in a

variety of ways that make use of different web options. The use of links to charts and real life examples and reaction from other

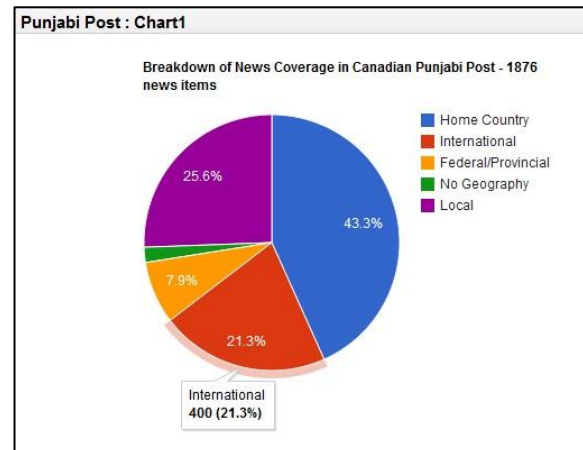
experts or the community provides more detail on the findings and their impact. The videos, audio clips and data charts within our stories provide enough variety to hold viewers' interest and allow us to present the findings in various formats.

Examples of various elements currently on the website include:

- Opening video slideshow on the [homepage](#) featuring a voiceover by the researcher accompanied by images. This provides a general introduction and description of the Local News Research Project with a particular emphasis on why local news matters.
- Professor Lindgren's [op ed piece](#) on research about the portrayal of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the news. Earlier versions of this article first appeared online in [J-Source](#), a platform for news, commentary and discussions of journalism, and the community news site [Openfile.ca](#). On the research website, we expanded coverage to include a photo and audio interview with Evon Reid, a young man who talks about how he was affected by negative media portrayals of his disadvantaged neighbourhood.
- A news [story](#) on the researcher's presentation to ethnic media news

outlets that makes the case for more local news content in their coverage. The multimedia story includes photos of two ethnic media journalists along with audio interviews where they provide their reaction to the researcher's conclusions. The piece also has links to Professor Lindgren's open-source, peer-

reviewed [journal article](#), as well as links to charts that provide information on the local news content for each of the four ethnic newspapers examined in the study. The researcher, in a short



audio interview that is accompanied by a photo, lists practical ways ethnic media could cover more local news.

- [A scholarly paper](#) co-authored by the researcher and a research assistant that explains how the mapping of local news can be used to advance scholarly research on journalism. This academic article, which first appeared in a conference proceedings, includes colour images of maps and a chart explaining coding procedure with a view to increasing readers' understanding of the local news mapping methodology. The scholarly tone of the paper is offset by a piece of journalism – a video slideshow that appears at the beginning – with a voiceover by Professor Lindgren. In the voiceover she explains the methodology

of the research, particularly the use of maps to determine geographic patterns of news coverage.

Reaching beyond the academy through social media

Websites that feature research can be paired with social media to further the dissemination process online. In 2007, for instance, the mainstream media covered [a story](#) about Scarborough residents who complained that the area was being negatively portrayed in the news. Toronto city councillors representing Scarborough brought the issue to the city's executive committee and asked for an edict on how incidents that take place in Scarborough should be referred to in news reports (Moloney, 2007). If a similar controversy erupted today, Professor Lindgren could tweet about it on Twitter and refer people to the [article](#) on the Local News Research Project website about media coverage of troubled neighbourhoods.

We also hope the website will attract broader public interest and be of use to community agencies, including some that will link to the research website from their own online site. A website such as [JaneFinch.com](#), created to combat the negative image of the Jane and Finch neighbourhood, could link to our website on its own page. This way, Jane-Finch.com could connect its audience to academic research supporting the need for an alternative way to report on disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

University students could also benefit from having such websites available to them. Students are often unaware of the research activities within the academy. They attend professors' lectures and, in many cases, only ever know them as instructors. To the extent that the research outlined on websites like ours is drawn to students' attention by faculty, social media and other means, it can inform their own studies and they may become more aware of and more interested in research as a long-term career option.

Conclusion

Journalistic storytelling combined with the Internet is an excellent way to disseminate research to university students, the general public, community groups, and others interested in or affected by the research. Journalism techniques and writing are designed to reach a wide audience; these techniques result in stories that eliminate jargon and condense information so that complex research ideas and results can be conveyed to audiences outside the scholarly community. Posting these stories online means that everyone has easy access to the research. The web also allows for the use of videos, photos and charts, which can help maintain the audience's interest and enhance their understanding of research questions and answers.

The Internet is a powerful tool for making information available for free to worldwide audiences. It is essential, however, that the information be presented in ways people

can easily understand and, dare I suggest, enjoy. This Undergraduate Research Opportunity project argues that the journalist's toolbox is full of exactly the sorts of tools required to do the job.

Sahar Fatima is a journalism student at Ryerson University.

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