

## Get Back to Creative Visual Storytelling

By Bob Gould, School of Journalism, Michigan State University



Two weeks after watching a helium-filled, saucer-shaped balloon glide above the Colorado terrain, I wanted to spend some time talking about the whole fiasco in my college journalism ethics class. Shortly after bringing up the term “Balloon Boy,” a couple students looked puzzled. “What are you talking about?” asked one. “I’ve no idea what he’s referring to,” remarked another. To my astonishment I asked what cave they had been hiding in for the past 14 days. After these students received some good-natured ribbing from the rest of the class, I couldn’t help but wonder how this was possible. Even if they don’t watch the news, they would certainly see it on *The Daily Show* or on Facebook, for goodness sake. They had no real explanation about why they hadn’t come across the story that captured the country’s attention for several days.

The point here is not to show their ignorance, but to get to the root of the problem: If they didn’t know about a story that seemingly everyone else knew about, how do we get them engaged? What do we have to do to get students interested in news?

You would think that with Facebook and Twitter it would be a no-brainer. They spend every free minute texting and updating their FB status, and the news can virtually *come to them*. But even these journalism students, who are supposed to be more engaged than other typical collegians, aren’t interested in the content.

I often ask my students how they get their news and most do not watch television news. Many do not consume news at all.

A few watch Jon Stewart and some say they mostly get their news online at CNN or the BBC. They watch video on YouTube or other news sites. Very few listen to podcasts to get their news. Many are now (begrudgingly) joining Twitter. They still think it’s about status updates. (Although we, as a faculty, are feverishly teaching them otherwise.)

I’ve been out of the newsroom for two years now and in that time, much has changed in the industry. Being an “outsider” has really taught me a lot. I look at TV news much differently than when I was producing it on a daily basis. Things we would agonize over in a news meeting or out in the field often mean nothing to me as viewer. I find myself saying, “I can’t believe they LED with THAT!” or “Why DIDN’T they cover THAT?” Easy for me to say as a Monday morning quarterback. I also find myself watching the 6 p.m. news less and less. I get a lot of my news online now.

I know that newsrooms are smaller and coverage isn’t what it used to be. That’s the unfortunate part. But with all the change in the industry, there’s one thing broadcasters need to do to re-engage the

Gen Y-ers: Get back to creative visual storytelling. Those who know me know that I have been preaching great storytelling for years. I believe a great story supersedes everything. Why? Because of how ubiquitous news headlines are. We get snippets of news from Twitter and other online sources, but we get very little real journalism with it.

Great stories stand out among the clutter. Just because the delivery method has changed doesn't mean we have to give up our core journalistic values and the ability to tell great stories -- stories that affect people and the lives that we live. Anybody can send a tweet. Anybody can write a quick news headline. But it takes a lot more to spin a yarn, to create a story with multiple layers, to introduce us to characters that touch us and inspire us, to be truth-tellers and hold the powerful accountable and to give us great compelling visuals with meaningful natural sound. These things are what sets you apart as a news organization. I tell my students that if they can tell a great story, their resume will jump to the top of the pile.

As we struggle to figure out what the next trend in content delivery or social media will be, the tendency is to shy away from the visual storytelling. As the equipment gets smaller and more affordable, more journalists are required to be "one-man bands." While that's a hard pill to swallow for many traditionalists, it's an opportunity for many journalists to learn new skills, and it's getting easier to do so.

So how do you incorporate new media and great storytelling? How do we do this on a shoestring budget and with low staffing levels? First, there's got to be buy-in from the top all the way down. Next, you must provide adequate training. Then, provide the tools in the newsroom to make it all come together. I know what you're saying: Budgets are tight, yada, yada. But there are creative ways of training that won't break the bank.

Here are a few:

- Lean on professional organizations to help out. Send a couple of motivated newsroom individuals to workshops, webinars or lectures. Many are inexpensive and some are even free.
- Make partnerships with universities. Being in the academic world has its advantages, and one of them is we are given the freedom to explore new ideas and research new methodologies. Much of the latest research is being done online.
- Use the Internet. There are many great bloggers and experts out there who offer up free educational content. Get some of your news staffers excited about learning new things.
- Lastly, if they want buy-in, news managers can't just preach it. If you talk about providing content for mobile phones, then get the staff smart phones so they understand WHY you need to provide this content.

This is only a start. After the dust settles, I believe we will come back to a time where quality visuals and sound make a difference to news consumers. We can produce HD content or content for a 3-inch phone, but ultimately it's the story that people will remember. We cannot do this without the help of the broadcast industry.

As an educator, it now is my responsibility to train young broadcast journalists for the next generation. We teach them trendy tools, but we rely on journalistic fundamentals. We teach them ethical decision-making and how to tell good stories. We teach them how to find a character and personalize a story, how to realize that the reporters AREN'T the story and how to understand that stories are about

people, not places or things. These are the things that shouldn't change. What the future holds for journalism is uncertain. What IS certain is that when delivery methods change, the fundamentals of storytelling and journalistic integrity need to remain the same -- even when we have to say it in 140 characters or less.

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