A Brave New (Digital) World

An old-school journalist learns the new way to tell a story.

By Michelle Kearns, Kiplinger Fellow

An e-mail that appeared in my in-box one day last year led me to a free seminar about reporting on foundations and their tax-exempt money, and set me off on a mind-expanding, digital trip to Ohio State University.

Within a year, I took a leave of absence from my regular job as a *Buffalo News* reporter working at a desk in a newsroom the size of a football field and became one of six fellows in the suite of the Kiplinger Program at the John Glenn School of Public Affairs.

It was a serendipitous stroke of luck. Debra Jasper and Betsy Hubbard, who lead this post-printcentric journalism fellowship, chose this year to strengthen its new emphasis on digital storytelling. They believe, and I have come to agree, that understanding digital media is critical. More and more it is how people tell each other things. To miss out on this public Internet conversation is to miss out on patterns of communication that can affect how we see the world and learn to live together.

Now as I work from my temporary office in Page Hall, the building's modern glass lines, elegant within the walls of an old columned façade, seem like a metaphor for the way digital media should – eventually -- work inside my old-school-print-reporter brain.

Still, there are many, many days when it feels more exactly as one fellow described -- like a bubblegum bubble about to pop.

Instead of doing what I have done every day for almost two decades – interviewing people, writing down what they say and making a story out of it by typing words on a keyboard – I have tried to find my way to a new kind of journalism by entering the often enigmatic and elusive world of all things digital.

Three months of work at OSU and, finally, I have figured out how to use a computer program to mix voice, music and photos. With a few computer clicks, I can now show three little slide shows that play from a screen window the size of a postcard. They unfold with pictures by a *Buffalo News* photographer and odd-but-good original music that Digital Union staff showed me how to find at the music-sharing Web site Creativecommons.org.

To help get me this far, Debra and Betsy's digital media class for graduate students in the School of Public Affairs last quarter introduced the fundamentals -- lessons in the impact of digital media on public affairs, how to use new tools, and how journalists and public policy folks are posting and analyzing information.

Run a document through one site and tag "clouds" of words appear, with big and small type sizes to show what words are used most. Another, Gapminder.org, shows in animated form how income and life expectancy vary around the world. Instead of a bar graph, dots on a grid expand in color with the brush of a mouse: a tiny blue one for Swaziland, where people make about $3,000 a year and live to about 40; a bigger yellow dot for U.S. residents who average $30,000 incomes and 78-year-long lives.
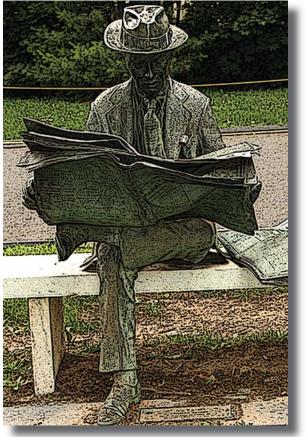
Slowly, some cyber savvy has taken hold. I have a page on Facebook. With help from Digital Union staff who used saint-like patience and good humor, I have almost conquered the sound editing program that once made weeks of work disappear with sweeps of the mouse.

I have posted some of my favorite new Web links on del.iciou.us, a site designed for sharing and storing useful ones. I have marveled at YouTube's election-season videos of heated reporter-candidate exchanges and the feel-good vibes another presidential contender generated when famous actors and singers crooned in his favor.

Curiosity led me to Twitter.com. I am now trying to understand why, according to one Web site count, more than 300,000 people type random thoughts in 140 characters or less for anyone to read as the day goes by.

Me, a few minutes ago this morning, writing as "buffalogirlsong" on Twitter: "just in. coffee at desk. philip glass station on pandora radio & story draft open before me. goal to finish by 3:30." But why would anyone want

Man Reading Newspaper, J. Seward Johnson

to know what I am doing at this moment? And, what's the point of taking the time to make a public declaration of coffee-drinking minutia?

It is the old-school reporter in me, the one who knows the power a good story can have to help a community understand itself, fix problems and urge action, who has felt the urgent, head-exploding pressure to unravel these digital mysteries so that I can tell online stories well enough to keep people clicking all the way through. Online readership is soaring, along with twitter memberships, just as newsprint readers vanish.

My own Kiplinger public affairs-related project is about how much foundations in my community spend and the people whose lives it affects. Nationwide, about 70,000 foundations have half a trillion dollars and gave away about $31 billion in 2005, according to the Foundation Center. As I look for the answers, I have interviewed foundation leaders and asked them why and how they give money away. I have talked to people who have ideas about how to make things better, who use foundation money to execute their do-good ambitions, such as teaching Buffalo's Somali refugees how to build a life in their cold, new urban home. I have listened to people who benefit from this money, who go to school because of the scholarships they win, find refuge from violent neighborhoods in safe after-school programs, and pay down debt because a free tax preparation service helps retrieve thousands in refund money.

My project is still unfinished. I have text stories in draft form, the beginnings of a sample Web site, and more sound interviews partly arranged and edited. The three little slide-show movies I finished last week help me know I am on the right track.

It amazes me how this new, emerging form of journalism is so cinematic and human. When I add music to the voice recordings and synchronize photos to the mix, the words and pictures seem more powerful together than they would be alone.

I know I will do more stories this way and share some

Scale, by Steven Siegel

cyber media techniques with my colleagues in Buffalo. For now, it is too soon to say what will come from the rest of my Kiplinger project.

One of my stories will explain how foundations in Buffalo have already begun to collaborate in a new way, trying to become more transparent and more public. For the first time, they are assessing among themselves how much money they have and what they spend it on.

There is hope that this clearer, more public view of Western New York's four hundred-plus foundations will make it easier to forge collaborations – and, say, find more pediatricians to help with a new center one foundation wants to create for the growing number of kids with autism and hyperactivity.

In this way, foundation leaders say, their money will better help Buffalo and its surrounding cities and towns. Maybe, this is a way out of the same kind of economic collapse that plagues others on the Rust Belt.

I have a similar notion about journalism in this digital age. The little online slide-show movies, tag clouds, twitters, YouTube videos, Creative-Commons' songs are revealing new parts of the world. And helping to shape it. The more people know, the easier fixing the problems and celebrating the good parts will be.

(Note to Twitter: Story draft done. Must get out of this office & let night air revive me. Have had enough of Mr. Glass. Need digital and non-digital worlds in equal measures.)

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