

The Use of UGC and Web 2.0 in a New Media, Digital, Non-Fiction, Collaborative Project: A Laboratory Research Assessment

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This set out to investigate and to critically assess the Use of UGC (User-Generated Content) and Web 2.0 in New Media Digital Non-Fiction for a Collaborative, Wiki-based project. This was created to raise awareness of a socio-political Issue (in this case, the detainment of Nobel Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, in Burma, also known as 'Myanmar', by the military junta).

Research questions

Build it and they will come..." Does the establishment of an activist online presence in a website necessarily generate a written response from interested users?

What New Media methodologies and tools can a journalist and non-fiction writer harness effectively to create awareness on a given topic, as well as to generate written responses as part of a widespread, viral collaborative community action?

Which platforms work best for such a project? Are they wholly computer-based, or is a more telephony-based (SMS) approach more successful and if so, why?

Which Web 2.0, Social Networking, SMS (Short Message Service) and Wiki and other tools can be used most effectively by an editor/writer in this kind of project? Are some better suited to the task than others and, if so, which ones and why?

Literature review

(available online with bibliography at:<http://cwnmlabresearchproject.googlepages.com/>)

Set-up of mission website

The Free Aung San Suu Kyi organization, can be found here: <http://freeaungsansuukyi.org/>

The site designed by a highly qualified, professional web graphics designer of the Editor's (Peter Popham's) choosing whose main concern was to provide the most aesthetic background on to which the text could be super-imposed. This site was built by the designer and

published using Plone CMS, open source software management. Previous reading research had shown that the implementation of some Web 2.0 ideas can, indeed, put users off or can be shown to be inconsequential to the users' core needs.

The participatory media project for Aung San Suu Kyi

can be found here: <http://108presentsforsuu.googlepages.com/>

Google Page Creator had shown itself in use to be most useful by an HTML layman for set up for the companion project site. The temptation, though, was to implement as many tools as there are room for on a page simply because they make a site entertaining as well as informative.

To blog or not to blog?

Blogging is an essential part of keeping a website alive as well as useful to its reader. Experienced print journalists are often reluctant to blog given their full-time print schedule. Updates to the message site, therefore, have been very ad hoc and have never established the sort of rhythm needed to attract and keep regular readers.

Investigation into generation of SMS text as content



Image 1

This stage of research focused on the possibilities for using SMS networks to generate text, either existing ones that could be ‘piggybacked’ upon, or effective and inexpensive set up of a brand new, dedicated network for the project.

Frontline SMS (**Image 1**, facing page), has, research shows, played an important part in the texting revolution, creating a mobile bridge in the digital divide. Instead, though, Twitter, a form of microblogging, was chosen for ease of setup. Having signed on through a web interface, IM agent, or by text, messages of 140 characters or less can be sent free as frequently as the correspondent wishes.

Investigation into, and selection of social networking site

The use of Twitter alone would not, research had shown and Howard Rheingold had emphasized,¹ sufficiently ground the project and so a suitable Social Networking Site had to be selected to couple with the project microblogging. According to the research, “Facebook is the most popular service among students, with almost four in five using it, and over half of the overall sample doing so frequently”. It was determined that MySpace was used by more than half of the sample, although just over one-third uses it often.

Set-up of a Facebook site, ID ‘Twitter Suu’

The Twitter Suu Facebook Profile (for Facebook members only) can be found here: <http://twitter.com/freesuukyio8>.



Image 2

message to generate content. The coupling of Twitter and Facebook has worked greatly to the project’s advantage.

A closer look at meta data

Content alone would not be enough to drive visitors to the site² but rather that meta data, that is data about data, or a system akin to cataloguing of books in a library, must also be employed. Look at TechCrunch’s tag cloud courtesy of technorati: (Image 2). Rather than a tag cloud, a ‘TweetCloud’ was used to define and sum up the issues surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi.

Establishment of a wiki to gather and to process generated text

The Twitter Suu Wiki (open to all) can be found here: <http://108presentsforsuu.pbwiki.com/>

Wikis are databases that can be edited by everyone, sometimes restricted through authorization processes. In a wiki you only need to know a few rules to edit articles, as in a blog but in contrast to a blog everyone can edit everything, and everyone can start a new topic.

Analysis and conclusion

This project has shown that while New Media offers significant advantages, it more often than not perplexes Old Media news professionals.

The establishment of an activist online presence in a website does not necessarily generate a written response from interested users. Not even those who had expressed support for Suu Kyi were necessarily moved to take the further step of sending her a message. The names of those who did sign up (either through email to the dedicated address: 108presentsforsuu@gmail.com, or through Facebook or Twitter), are, however, an important resource.

New Media tools have also been used successfully to proselytize those who knew nothing of Suu Kyi. This has been particularly true of the young, notably college students in the US, who continue to be mobilized successfully to sign on to the Facebook site. The use of Twitter has been less successful, despite the generation of media coverage in The Wall Tweet Journal (sic) on April 7th, 2008. While New Media and Web 2.0 tools are essential ingredients in the successful generation of content, they are no substitute for a community created through bonds of common interest beyond the web, where the bond is the key not the technology. The tools used provided a useful adjunct to the community being created but they cannot BE the community.

This research has confirmed that a telephony-based SMS rather than Web interaction with interested contributors could in the long-term be very effective because of its ease of use, minimal time required, and low threshold of knowledge and equipment but, in this case, ONLY if coupled with a Social Networking site such as Facebook.

References

- 1 Audio interview in Second Life with Professor Howard Rheingold on Smart Mobs (<http://cdn4.libsyn.com/ccragg123/HowardRheingoldDMULab.mp3>).
- 2 Blog interview with Jess Laccetti on Tag Clouds, www.jesslaccetti.co.uk/musings, posted 02/04/08.

(The original, fully referenced, 5,000 word paper with bibliography is available online at: <http://cwnmlabresearchproject.googlepages.com/>)