

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

Friday—Panel 3: Online news presentation

Have we already developed the language for this genre of journalism?

Panelists:

Leah Gentry, managing director, Finberg-Gentry/The Digital Futurist Consultancy, and Adjunct Professor, USC Annenberg School of Journalism (moderator and presenter)

Gary Kebbel, news director, America Online

Michael Silberman, MSNBC.com Managing Editor East Coast

Naka Nathaniel, NYTimes.com Multimedia Editor

LEAH GENTRY: ... Gary Kebbel, who is the News Director of AOL, Naka Nathaniel, who represents the New York Times from Paris and Michael Silberman, who is the Deputy Editor/East Coast from MSNBC.

An amazing thing happened as I sat at the airport restaurant yesterday and watched my laptop fully corrupt. Crunch – there went my presentation. Crunch – there went the student papers that I was supposed to correct this (inaudible) piece of research that I was supposed to complete. As each file curled up and turned to ash, my Fahrenheit 451, I thought of only two things: next time I'm going to buy that gold package of customer support when they sell me the laptop, and I need to look into one of those survival courses at the community college – the kind where they teach you to forage for food in your backyard and chop wood. I think I've become to technologically dependent.

I was walking on campus at USC yesterday behind two young men who were both clearly students. One was wearing a black t-shirt that said, "USC Engineering Symposium - Microsoft." He turned to the other and he said blithely, "I support space exploration." And I thought to myself, "well, everybody supports space exploration, don't they?" I come from the generation where everybody supports space exploration, but then it occurred to me as I walked to my car after teaching my class that maybe that if you're a young scientist trying to get your project funding, everybody doesn't support space exploration.

It's somewhat like our newsroom today. In my years as a print and new media journalist, all the constants that have been, have been news and budgets. That's it. News and budgets. And you have to deal with both day in, day out. News and budgets. Like the scientists, too, over the years I have weighed news and budgets.

This panel is about how the original choices that we've made in new media have turned out. I've made choices that weren't popular with the mainstream newsroom. I chose for multimedia. I spent a lot of money over the years at the Chicago Tribune, at the Los Angeles Times, even at Excite and they weren't always perhaps the best choices – sometimes they were costly choices.

Today I'm going to look at, and my panel is going to look at, how some of those choices have turned out and how some of those choices have been followed by others and, basically, where we've ended up. We think we've come up with something that's ended up being a language for this medium. We'll take a look.

Low and behold – my new presentation. It's very spare.

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

Why interactivity? Consider: story pieces don't have to be additive. In fact, since most people experience stories in different ways, everyone doesn't visit all pages of the story. You want different pieces of the story to repeat the same material and cover it in different ways. This we all know – we're all experienced journalists.

Consider: media organizations each year look at this news, they look at the budgets, they look at how they've spent their people and they say, "Do you really need to spend that body on a multimedia person. Do you really need all of that rich media to tell the story?"

Consider: As we look around our websites, do you need to have that piece of motion to tell the story? Do you need to have that person who spent his or her entire day working on a piece of rich media? And I would answer that the answer is yes, you do.

Some things I'd like you to think about before you listen to the panel: If we look at the Iraq story, could the Iraq story been told the way that is has been told if we hadn't had rich media?

Let me see how fast our web connection is. Or not, I probably should have cached these between. I'm not going to – ok – can you – in a hurry, cause I wanted to show a couple things from the Washington Post. Ok, Doug's going to come in from the back door of the Washington Post. While Doug gets us in the back door. (Voice: No, we're going in the front door here.) (inaudible) Thank you very much. I don't have my contacts list to look up mine. All right. Let's see if I remember how to do this. We're going to "world." Yeah, I did. Oh, photos and video, I'm sorry. And "world." And then "violent days pollution."

This is the day of the bodies on the bridge. How many of you, I'd like a show of hands, how many of you saw this piece? I am not going to show this piece unless there is a strong movement by the audience to have me show this piece, I would rather not. Not the least of which I don't want to offend the webcast. I encourage you to go and look at this piece if you have not seen it. What I wanted to show you was the opening page of this piece, which has an editor's note talking about how some of the images in this gallery may be disturbing. In fact, some of the images in this gallery were very disturbing and much like the image of the young girl in Vietnam running away on fire, the story of Vietnam could not have been told, and was not real for me as a child until I saw that image, which my parents encouraged me to see and said, "This is what's happening. You need to know this." And until I saw those pictures, I did not understand.

I also saw the pictures of the aftermath of the U.S. troops shooting into the crowds in Fallujah, which the Washington Post also carried and you need to go and see that. In fact, the Washington Post multimedia stories everyday have done, I think, the single best job, and no discredit to the New York Times, which has done a heck of a job also, that has done probably the single best job of giving a well-rounded view of what the heck is going on in Iraq, which is quite a story. You have to be able to view this stuff. And it is material that you will not see in print, you probably will not see on the nightly news in the United States and this is the online edition being able to provide a service that other media cannot.

Now, I got challenged on this at lunch by someone who I hope will stand up and ask the same question afterwards because I think it's a good discussion to have about whether or not this violates balance but I don't want to take too much time up with the introduction so I'm going to move on.

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

We serve a place by providing material that cannot be seen offline. Secondly, consider tree-mapping. You can view data in ways that people can't think about it any way else. You always hear people talk about, "the market went up, the market went down." Tree-mapping is a way of looking at large groups of data at the same time and getting a sense – this is what happened on the market today, this is the smart money map of the market - and it's based on some work by some scientists at the University of Maryland who let you look at large data sets and this is a commercial application of it and you can see by looking at various sectors what's going on and you can get an overall sense of whether this is a big, red picture or big, green picture how the markets done.

Another application of tree-mapping, which is a heck of a lot of fun if you haven't seen it is - forget it, I'm not going to download Flash - but I will send this presentation. It's the tree-map of the Google News application, and if you haven't seen it, it's wonderful. You can view how Google News is viewed in, I think, 6 different, 8 different countries and so you can get a sense of how news is being looked at through Google News all around the world. And it's fascinating to see how news is being, sort of, viewed in different countries and almost skewed in different counties; and news in South Africa versus news in Mexico versus news in the United States versus news in Canada. Amazing stuff.

Consider: Global broadband usage. This one is my favorite piece of data. It's a little old - it's from the end of 2002. In case you wondered the best broadband penetration – Korea, not the United States. Number two, Hong Kong. Number Three, Canada. Number four, Taiwan. Number five, Iceland. Number six, Denmark. Number seven, Belgium. Number eight, Sweden.

Where's the U.S.? There it is – Number eleven. Ok. It's not about the United States. So if everybody says well, "people who are heavy on broadband, it's all about the United States." It's not about the United States. The best broadband penetration is really outside of the United States – this is per capita, ok. And this is old data, this is the end of 2002. So it's - this has grown since then.

Now, Jupiter has a better visualization of this chart. Again, sorry, died with the laptop so I wish I could've given you a prettier presentation of this data. But the bottom line is that broadband usage has grown throughout the globe. So while people will tell you that, you know, you really need to keep bandwidth down, yes, it's true, but one the other hand, don't swallow that lollypop whole. You can use that as a healthy part of your site's content.

Ok, and last but not least, as you're considering online content, watch the best of the best for guidelines on what to do. My personal favorites, beyond all the people on my panel, **El Mundo West**, PBS.org does some of the richest content. I love what they do. And a large Poynter site, Interactivenarrative.org, put together by a guy named Andrew Devigal who was, I was fortunate enough to have as my art director at the Chicago Tribune, and I'm just going to click to this. He does an ongoing round-up of great work – (inaudible) de Brazil is a wonderful peak if you haven't seen it. And you can also, this is **blog(inaudible)**, so you can contribute neat pieces so that you've seen and if you teach, I encourage you, use this for your classes. If you're just from, if you just like to see neat stuff this is a great place to look.

I am now going to pass to the first person on my panel here. Thank you.

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

GARY KEBBEL: First, I'm required to ask is there anyone here from the Securities and Exchange Commission or the Department of Justice or perhaps maybe **David Buys** from the Washington Post? I need to make sure what the audience is and what we're really talking about and what's going to go out here. Yeah, they probably all are. I mean, I'm in an odd position in this panel actually being the conservative one, and that's not exactly a position that I'm used to. It's rare for me to be the most conservative person on a panel and it's a role that I'm not used to. So, we'll see how this works.

And the reason I say that I'm the conservative one on this is because of the development of AOL and AOL News and what's been happening with it in the past year or so and what will be happening this year. Up in September AOL News, this past September, AOL News relaunched in HTML. Now, many of you would think, "And that's news?" Um, what's so special or intriguing or interesting about that?

Well, let me tell you that, first of all, a couple things. That if you're taking a culture, a system, a technology, a (inaudible) that over fifteen years has been built up around a given technology and a given way of doing things. Obviously changing all of that takes a lot of thought, a lot of time, a lot of planning up front.

For instance, let's talk about election nights. Almost every website that I've ever either worked at or watched on any election night has gone down at some time or another. Definitely gotten back up many times, but almost every site has gone down. AOL News has not and one of the reasons is because it has acres of server farms for its rainman system and its rainman publishing.

Rainman is the system that we're moving away from. It's a proprietary publishing system that stands for "Remote Automated Information Manager." And it's great for fourteen (inaudible) and it was designed to get pretty much in that time. The pages are tiny. The templates are locked. The only freedom you have on there is a, you can put the text in one place, you could put a photo in another place and it's a fixed place, and you could put the links on another place and it's a tiny little screen but, boy, does it load fast and its great on dial-up modem.

So for many years this was a great thing for us. As, of course, the web grew, as HTML skills grew, as Flash became more important it was clear that AOL was going to be left behind, both if it could not change its strategy and if it could not take advantage of a lot of the open source skills and software programs that are out there. So we began the process of switching to HTML.

One reason why I think this is important also is that AOL News, according to Media Metrix, has about 23.2 unique million users, or had 23.2 million unique users in March of this year. And 4.5 of those came from the at-work audience. Yahoo News was next with something like 22 million unique users in March, but 9 million of its users came from the at-work audience.

So, our strength clearly is the at-home audience. We have never been able to break into the at-work audience because when you're publishing in a proprietary system at most educational institutions, governmental institutions and businesses the proprietary AOL client, the proprietary software, is not allowed to be loaded. So, we are cut out of the at-work audience very, very significantly.

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

By going to HTML we can allow our members at work to access the work and the value add that AOL editors do and they can see it at work and they can see it now in AOL Search. So by accessing AOL.com and right now it's on "My AOL," "AOL member," after logging in, being prompted for a screen name, will be able to see the AOL news articles that are enhanced with various levels of interactivity. Or, a lot of time, I'll just call them "modules of stuff" whether that stuff is video, audio, photo gallery, the chat, the message board, any or all of the above.

So, what's important for us with this (inaudible) is that it takes AOL, and AOL News in particular, but now other channels that AOL are following throughout this whole year, will (inaudible) into HTML and allowing people at work to now access what we're doing.

What I think is significant about this, also, is the fact that if you look at Yahoo and if you look at AOL you can see that in many ways the two are starting to converge their business models. Yahoo originally really made the bulk of its revenue on advertising revenue and AOL made the bulk of its revenue on subscription revenue. The recession hit, the Yahoo News suffered a huge hit in advertising revenue, as did all of us, they in particular. So, they've decided, when they got a new CEO, that they needed to get more subscription pieces – more areas that they could charge for.

AOL News, or AOL in general, is doing the same sort of thing by trying to, in expanding ourselves through HTML, and now, of course, having standard ad sizes and making it easier for ad agencies around the world to sell ads and place ads, and making it easier to use the sponsored links and Google and all that, we have opened up ad revenue that was not available to us before.

So the switch to HTML has been significant in many ways. I would say the two key ones are opening up ad revenue because our tiny pages used to have, the largest ad on them was 60 pixels by 234, I think it was, you know, not even banner size on an HTML page. And that was the largest. So, now of course we're doing the 160 by 600 and then the (inaudible) and all of this along with the sponsored ads, sponsors links.

So that, plus opening up the at-work market and allowing personalization, are why this is all being done and why it's all very important for us. And I'm just going to grab a drink of water here because I need to.

So, let me mention that because how audience is heavily oriented at night, our curve is very different from many news websites where you'll see on many sites that the traffic starts going up and peaking at noon, one o'clock often is the peak of the traffic and then it starts going down at various levels very quickly, various inclines. With AOL News what happens is it starts going up and it pretty much just keeps going until about 8-10 p.m., which is our peak.

So, it's very, very different from most other news sites. Our peak is, on most nights, from 8-10 p.m. So, at 6 p.m. we put together a special each day that is not necessarily the news of the day, but we hope it's sort of the "talker" of the day or the water cooler story of the day, because, again, we figure at 6 o'clock when people are coming on to AOL they're not necessarily coming on for the news of the day. You know, they're home, they're probably coming on to check their email and the first thing they see when they log on is the AOL Welcome Page and we probably have maybe two or three seconds to grab them and try to sidetrack them to news before they grab their email, if that. So, and the

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

news junkies of course can go directly to the news channel, they can bookmark the news channel.

But we have started doing special treatment for one story of the day, which we hope to continue to build up more and more, starting about 6 p.m. and that's what I'll start to show you. But the thing about this is, we talked about how important it is to know the cost of producing this and know all the information, but I think really what's important, what's important is being able to know your audience also. And, for us, our audience mainly is users who do not have sophisticated computers.

The majority of our users are not on broadband, whereas I've read and heard comments from Michael that MSNBC's percentage of broadband users is extraordinarily high – 70-80% or higher (from audience: "between 60 and 70") --between 60 and 70%. Ours is nowhere near that and, not only that, many of our members have their resolution set at 8 by 6. It - they're, in essence, they're on old computers, they have not changed their resolution so that for us and the HTML experiment, not experiment but uh, they're getting used to this.

And crawling as we will in creating interactivity, creating user involvement on these pages is still a process for us of also thinking we are going, we need to create a story that can be viewed on the AOL service, it can be viewed in HTML outside the AOL service, it can be viewed in narrowband, and it can be viewed in broadband. So, we have a lot of technology trying to do all this branching but still, nonetheless, we're thinking ok, for this piece, if for broadband we have video, for narrowband let's show a photo gallery or just a photo, depending on what's there, what are we going to show inside the client, what are we going to show outside the client.

That's the transition stage we're at right now. It's rather difficult. It's going to continue to get better as more and more people move to broadband, but right now our transition phase on this is difficult.

What you'll see here is our, hoping that what we're doing is using our strength and our strength is not what Naka's is, is not what Michael's is in terms of the development of Flash storytelling and Interactives. Our strength is using AOL's strength, which is community and trying to involve our members in the story, trying to draw them in, trying to extend their time on the story.

And I tell ya, we also just started also experimenting with the page tracking, the **omniture**, and we are finding a phenomenal correlation between the number of various modules that we have on a page and the length of time that the member or the user stays on that page. So a page with several modules might have one minute, two minutes, or less. A page with multiple, four or five modules, easily can have a three or four minute time period for the page, which we're finding to be pretty amazing.

So, let's look at a couple. Interesting, huh? The good news is (inaudible), which helps. Since we had done this earlier, I didn't think that. This actually is the process that someone would go through at work. This is exactly what someone at work, without this secure ID, uh – number, but if someone at work wanted to access these (inaudible). That's ok. It changes every minute, it's you know, it just changes every minute. (inaudible). No. What I wanted was like the whole article. Uh. Let's see what we have here, yeah, let's go back. Well, I'll tell you what, can we, let's do that. Try this. Um.

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

So what we do each evening is we get together with the designers. At the beginning of the day we have meeting in the morning. We talk about what's the "talker" story going to be and how are we going to deal with it. So, this one obviously is talking about the harping back and forth about whose fault it is that the gas prices are high or who's going to keep them high. Um. We have the story. We always allow the people to post in message boards, to go to chat rooms to talk about it. Often, but not always, we have video but what we do not do is embed the video. We definitely don't auto play it and we do not embed it. Again, that's in deference to multiple places that we are broadcasting this article – narrowband, broadband, inside the client, outside the client. We want to make it a choice.

But what you will see that we do, you know for us, interactivity a lot is the votes. Getting people to vote on what they think, either by watching the video ad and then commenting on it, reading the comments and then voting on it and just giving their opinions.

Uh, "Noted Conservatives Back Bush," and again you'll see the poll - we always have the poll. Now these polls will range from 250,000 users in evening to about a million, and it depends on the topic. We actually, for President Bush's press conference we broke the polling system this past week because there were so many people voting at once that the whole polling system crashed.

(inaudible question from audience) The question is basically, I don't remember exactly, but I think it was along the lines of "Do you believe what he's saying?" (inaudible audience.)

Ok, so again, the chat, the talk, this package again was talking about what conservatives are saying, so we have various pieces of video - always a vote with, often a vote with it – "Do you agree with what George Will's saying, Do agree with what Bob Novack's saying, Do you agree with Bill Riley?" And not everyone does. "Nascar Dad's," the same way.

You start to see the, a pattern here. Obviously, we put the art at the top, we put the poll at the top, we try to involve people and we have, again, the video where it helps to have it. We don't always feel we need it. One of the various, like I say, these modules that we insert into the article are ones that we use to try to, again, draw people in more. We have a deal with *The Onion* to do a political glossary for us, which often is sort of fun. You know their definition of politician, their definition of budget deficit, sometimes definitely worth reading. And then we add very, this would be an article or a audio.

So, my point on these is that we are using audio, we are using video, we're not embedding Flash yet because we're concerned about the download for our many, many narrowband users. We are then, in essence instead, trying to use what we feel is the strength of our audience – the fact that they like to talk, they like to vote. We think we've involved them enough so that they are used to this sort of request – you know, "what do you think, give us your opinion." No one is passing this off as scientific polling – it's entertainment value, it's just fun – but at the same time, it's used to involve people. And again, the video is a link out, the vote often is a link out or the audio is a link.

What you're going to see from the other people is much more sophistication in how this involvement is conducted on the pages – how the stories are told – and I guess one of the questions that I want to throw out there is, do we have a sense – I mean Leah

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

answered the question in the affirmative, "yes, all this is worth it." And I'm not sure. I'm definitely not sure. I know it's fun. I know editors and reporters love to do it. I know that for the AOL News audience it's not the right thing to do because I know what computers they're on and I know that most of them are narrowband.

So, how do you decide, you know, that the tide is turning – we're moving more toward broadband. We're going to be using a lot more interactive storytelling... Is it interactive storytelling? Is it the end in its own right? Is it the supplement to the story? Is it something that we use to help tell the story? Or are we still at the phase where we're doing it because we can? Now, I would say the sophisticated people in this why couldn't the New York Times and MSNBC are not doing it because they can? But, and, Washingtonpost.com.

What I think, you know, we probably all have seen some interactive, some flash, that it is just like ok - I'm not sure I needed that and how much effort went into creating it? So, my question to throw out, and I don't know the answer, is how do we decide, in essence, the cost effectiveness of doing this? How do we decide whether it helps retention? How do we decide whether it helps the frequency, or time spent? Or even if it does help time spent on one page, does that make them see the ad on the page or does it just make them go to the video and pay more attention to the video and the Flash? (inaudible voice from audience...) ...Excellent...and there we go. Which means I think that we're probably just ready for the next presentation.

GARY KEBBEL: I saw already that this is actually your type of machine already. It doesn't have Flash loaded on it. Perfect AOL machine. Yes, we need the Flash. I don't understand how you got this computer up here without it. (Background voice – "it's part of a department conspiracy") ...Yeah, you snuck in here late last night Gary, I know. ...Yeah, exactly, Wayne the (inaudible). That's exactly what it is. (inaudible background.) ...Here we go. (Inaudible background) Oh that's the old – what's the old joke? – that's what all this (inaudible) here on the screen right now – (inaudible). All right. Did it come through? (inaudible background). Yeah, Gary, you can. (inaudible background).

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Gary, lots of people have tried to imitate your dayparting strategy and few have had your success. Can you tell us why this is? Can you take a guess on why this is?

GARY KEBBEL: Um, probably because they have mainly an at-work audience and we have mainly an at-home audience. But we also have an audience that's so large that it allows us to daypart and have good numbers in all of the various dayparts. I think that's one thing. The other is that on our welcome screen, which is our term for the home page, we have been dayparting for a long time. Again, just as a way to increase the click through on those screens at various times of the day. So, why we've done that, why it's worked for us, is that we worked to increase click-through and it has been happening. Why others might not, I don't know.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: As a follow up to that can you offer advice to anyone who is trying to improve their dayparting numbers or still attempting to improve their dayparting numbers?

GARY KEBBEL: Um, yeah, I think one of the first things I would say is that the, I think it's MORI Research, has a really excellent study on dayparting and they talk about, they definitely stress that it's important, it works, it's necessary – but, you know what, to me

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

dayparting is just something, it's being a good journalist. It's not dayparting, it's journalism. You know, at 4 o'clock when you think people are leaving the office you talk about the markets and the weather and the traffic. That's relevant, that's paying attention to your audience. You wouldn't put that up at 10 a.m. But you would put the opening market up at 10 a.m., so I think a lot of the dayparting is just simply being a good journalist and giving people what makes sense for them at that time. And that's the thing about this medium. You know, it's when we were daily in newspapers we would, in essence, put the most relevant thing out on the front page every day. Now it's just that we have the ability to do it every minute, every half hour, every hour. We just have to think a little differently.

LEAH GENTRY: Anyone else right now? Ok, another one for Gary. You said during the course of your talk that your users aren't heavy broadband, aren't high res, high-resolution. Do you have any sense whether this is the chicken and egg thing, um, from your previous, from your rain-man state or do you –

GARY KEBBEL: It's definitely the chicken or an egg, uh, um, no, I think, yes, that the idea that our, many of our users are (inaudible) –band, I mean we are very, correctly, still described as a dial-up service that is moving toward broadband. So, it makes a lot of sense to me that a lot of them do not have huge computer (inaudible) computers or broadband mentions.

LEAH GENTRY: We looked at some of the war images earlier. What is the toughest ethical issue that you've faced in the last three years?

GARY KEBBEL: Well, it's – those war images – was one decision that one, one of the very recent ones, we decided, again, for our audience that we would not show the bodies on the bridge and we would be much more conservative in what we showed on the home page – on the initial view and then we'd show more photos in the gallery inside, several clicks away. So, we made the decision to put some of the more graphic images several clicks away.

LEAH GENTRY: Can you talk a little bit about, can you talk a little bit about any multi-lingual experiments that AOL is doing right now?

GARY KEBBEL: Um, hmm. I mean we have – AOL Latino is now launching and we're doing two things. We're extending the dayparting to audience segments and, I mean, extending the thought, the idea, behind **dayparting** and applying it to audience segments. So we've created an area called "block focus." We've created AOL Latino and it's entirely different and specialized content in each of those areas for those particular audiences, which obviously are growing and are going to continue to grow and have been very underserved.

LEAH GENTRY: One of the things I found most interesting when I've visited your shop that I think that this group might want to hear about is when I've visited with your head of community and heard her speak about how you involve your users in terms of building participating communities. Could you speak a little bit to some of that topic?

GARY KEBBEL: Yeah, the, again, recognizing the history of AOL, much of which was built around the messages and the chat rooms and message boards - and then as AOL kept growing and expanding we had people who were used to participating in those forums and then we adapted it to news.

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

One of the things we do is we have people, I think, who are fairly skilled at guiding the conversation and setting up the message board and setting up the chat. So that they don't, we try to contextually integrate all that. We don't just put a link there that says, "talk about this." That takes you to a page, that's an index page of the nation chats, world chats, business chats, etc. If the story is 'The Fed raised Interest Rates Today,' then that's what the message board and links and promotion says. So what do you think about the Fed raising interest rates today? And very specific and very geared to, we hope, guiding people to the types of answers they want.

But then the other thing that we do is we try to model the behavior that we want them to show in these community areas. We do that by culling through the message boards and pulling out 10,12,15 particularly thoughtful, good quotes (inaudible) and feature them, in essence, in a slide show. So that member so and so says and it's "Pro-Bush," member so and so says its "Anti-Bush," to try to show people the types of comments that, if they make them, could get them more recognition.

LEAH GENTRY: Naka, are you ready for us?

NAKA NATHANIEL: I'm now ready – thank you very much Amy. I appreciate it. Thank you very much Gary.

GARY KEBBEL: Thank you very much – you guys did a wonderful job.

NAKA NATHANIEL: Well, thank you very much, Rosental, for inviting me to come back home to Texas and to the greatest university on the planet. If you don't know already, I'm a proud graduate of the University of Texas and the Journalism department. This is the first time that I've participated in an online symposium like this. It's usually my wife, Meredith Artley, who is the online Editor of the International Herald Tribune, who participates in these types of gatherings. Hopefully, by the end of my presentation you'd all wish that she was here instead of me.

There are many distinguished folks in this room and it's been quite an honor to meet many of you. I've really admired a lot of your work and it's been a really great opportunity for me to learn from you over the years. But, I accepted Rosental's invitation to come here today because of the opportunity to speak to the students, to my fellow Longhorns.

Here's my message, from those fellow Longhorns out there, and the compatriots. You want my job. And I want you to have my job and I want the powerful people in this room to prepare you for that job and ultimately to give you that job.

What is that job exactly? Well, we gave you a slight run-down of kind of what of I do - very, very short one. I'm based in Paris for the New York Times and the web, and there's a lot of questions of exactly what I do. But it's what you guys are going to be doing, ultimately. Now, business card, is that a good place to start? Well, not exactly. As, if you look, there's no title on here. You know, as the French say, or, as they don't say in Lubbock, to steal a phrase from Molly Ivans, "**Son peitra.**"

You know, there's no labeling on there. There's part of a reason in that is because you don't want to be limited, at least I don't want to be limited, in exactly what I do. I'm label

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

producer, photographer, cameraman, sound person, whatever it happens to be. That isn't exactly what's going on right now. What's going on is a lot of different things. So, what I do basically is online journalism. It's the actual details of writing, shooting, recording, voicing, programming and getting it back to others in New York City, which is often times the biggest of those challenges. A lot of tech support has to go into this.

Exactly ten years ago I was down on the third floor and I sat in the office with my professor, **Gail Wiley**. He was asking me what I wanted to do; he was asking everybody in the broadcast sequence at the time what they wanted to do. I was finishing up that sequence after, whatever it was, three, two, four semester, whatever it was, and **Gail** was going to encourage us in which direction to go, whether it be, you know, camera person in Bryan, you know, a producer in Texarkana, a reporter in Odessa – all extremely, extremely wonderful jobs, you know, very, very, a lot of glamour in Odessa.

But, uh, I kind of mumbled mouthed something like computers and journalism. Now, **Gail**, who was a great, he's very much into computers and, ultimately, actually left the university to go work for a website. He used to - the Chronicle. Uh, he asked me what I meant and I just said, "no," I just said, "no," I kinda shrugged my shoulders. "I always wanted to do computers and journalism." Well, he advised me then to go into newspapers and said you know maybe someday you'll end up doing computers and journalism. Well, I can't tell you how incredibly lucky I've been in the ten years since that discussion has happened and in the entire time I have been able to do computers and journalism.

So, let me tell you a little bit more about exactly what we've been up to and just to let you know how fortunate I've been able to do these online features that really resonated with the audience of the New York Times. My editor, **Lynn Apgard**, for starters and his predecessor, Bernie **Goertzman**, have been very, very encouraging in pushing us forward to do these types of endeavors and it's what's some great adventures for me. Especially in the past year since they've moved me to Paris.

For instance, in the past year I've wandered the halls of one of Saddam's prisons. I went rafting exceptionally close to musk ox and polar bears in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. I was detained in China while trying to visit the home of an imprisoned labor leader. And, most infamously, I helped a New York Times columnist buy two teenage prostitutes and return them to their village.

Let me show you real quickly how that piece turned out...

ELECTRONIC AUDIO: "The pre-eminent challenge of the 21st century may well be to address the harsh brutality that so many women in the third world face. Anywhere perhaps is the plight of these women etched in harsher terms than in Cambodia. (inaudible)...**Christof** at the New York Times, please join me as we confront this challenge head on.

NAKA NATHANIEL: Now, let me share with you exactly what was going on. I traveled with **Nick** to Cambodia and I was there every step along the way. And let me share with you, and basically, like I did with the whole audience, I wanted to share with them, the story of these girls in a way that was not able, Nick was not able to do in his column.

ELECTRONIC AUDIO: Male voice: "This is **Shray-Mon**." Female voice and interpreter voice: "I had to become a prostitute when a friend of mine was in a lot of trouble. I needed a

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

lot of money. I wanted to help her. Someone told me I could make a lot of money by selling my virginity...”

NAKA NATHANIEL: So **Shray-Mon** goes on to tell her story. **Nick** did buy her freedom and then we were able to take her back to her home, which is near the Vietnam border. Let me just play a little bit of what the homecoming is like...

ELECTRONIC AUDIO: Male voice: “She got more and more anxious and part of that was she said she was so much looking forward to seeing her sisters again but she was really fearful of her mother and I tried to tell her that no, your mother will be so thrilled to see you again, but I wasn’t really sure that was true. And finally we pulled and she opened the door and jumped out. (Background voices, crying of homecoming) And it was so moving and so...”

NAKA NATHANIEL: (inaudible)...you actually just heard how moving it was – these women were actually shrieking. They were going to have a funeral in 20 days for this girl. She thought she had been away for six months – she was gone for four years working in the brothels along the Cambodian border.

Let me tell you a little bit more about **Nick Christof** because someone today at lunch was asking me, well, you’ve worked with, the perception was, you’ve worked with a lot of older people, don’t you? Isn’t it a little bit difficult for them to get on board with this stuff. Let me tell you about this one in particular. **Nicolas Christof**. He’s a Pulitzer Prize finalist this year and, for commentary. He and his wife, **Sheryl Rue Dunn**, won the Pulitzer Prize for reporting from Tieneman’s Square back in 1989. He started a web log last year just before the war in Iraq and he’s been incredibly enthusiastic in his willingness to do stuff specifically for the web.

We did presentation a couple of days ago back in New York and let me share with you something that he said. “I’d say that for writers like myself we don’t cooperate with the web because it’s newspaper policy or because we have to – it’s good for us. Readers want, *writers* want to be read so if I’m trying to call attention to a problem the web is one of the most powerful tools I have and I’d be crazy to ignore it.”

Now, that’s Nick. He’s been a finalist twice for the Pulitzer. He’s one of the most influential people at the New York Times – he’s into this stuff. People are following in his wake. I’ll tell you a little more about him in a bit.

Let me explain to you right now a little more about my role, this job that I want you to guys to have ultimately. I travel with the correspondent or I meet them at the site where they’re doing their story. At the same time as they’re reporting out things, I’m there gathering stills, audio, video. All my gear fits into this little bag right here, so it’s hard to say that I lug around a ton of equipment. I try to be as unobtrusive as possible and to help out with the story. So it’s led to some very, very interesting working environments. You know, like I said, all these different adventures that we’ve had.

But we end up working in different places like on the road, bouncing from rut to rut in places that really don’t have roads like Cambodia and Chad. And while the reporter is writing out his story, I’ll be there editing so that the audio, video, some of the text that will go along with the photos, and when the time comes we’ll both transmit our work back to New York at the same time. Which has also led to some kind of interesting places where we’ve transmitted from. We loosely commandeered a ramshackle internet café in the

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

Cambodian border to get back this piece and last month. We were in Africa – I remember humming Paul Simon's "Under African Skies" as I was setting up the satellite unit trying to get the work back to New York in time.

So, it's interesting things like that where you have to have the knowledge not only to actually put the stuff together, the storytelling, all the different gathering options that you have to, but you also have to be technically savvy to help these people out. That's one also the best, it's been one of my best avenues in is because I've been technically savvy even though I didn't display it early on. I picked up a computer and I fumbled around out here but we ultimately did get it up so... But it's about being able to be technically savvy. Don't, you know, when people come and ask you for help don't shy them away. You're (inaudible). You're more in tune to this stuff.

While these assignments have been great, it's the direct, it's been sharing the direct response from our readership, that has been the most rewarding part of this work and it's what makes the correspondents, the photographer's that are used to working in other media huge, huge backers of this. I did a piece in Jordan last year with our Jerusalem correspondent James Bennett immediately after President Bush met with Ariel Sharon and Abu Mazen about the road map. Sat down and did a piece called "Understanding Acuba With James," and I got a lot of wonderful mail and I was able to pass along to him, and afterwards he was just blown away by it. He's used to, as he wrote, he's used to being sprayed with bile and venom whenever it comes to his reporting on the Middle East and this is one situation where he's getting the love notes saying, "James, thank you for helping me understand this situation," "James, your reporting from Jerusalem has been heroic and courageous. Thank you for doing what you're doing."

Now, it's one thing to be paid – it's another thing to be loved. And they're paid well, but they also want to be loved and that's what is great things about this, is I'm able to share with them these honest feedback from the readership – stuff that they don't get in any other way. It's only available to them because of this little feedback button up here that goes in my, that I and a couple other web producers get. And we're able to share it with them, and I'll tell you what, it makes them feel so good afterwards.

And that word of mouth has gotten around. That's why people are now coming to us, asking us to do projects. It used to be not that long ago that I'd have to twist arms, cajole, wheedle, make promises, to get people to come out and do projects with us. That's not that case any longer.

You know, I just happened to be just recently, you know, my wife and I went on vacation to China and the Shang-hi bureau chief asked us to stay a couple more days because he wanted to do a piece with me. And that wouldn't have happened. Generally I would have had to call him a long time out and set something out. Now he heard that I was in China and he said, "come on down, I want to do something with you."

So it's been great things like that. They're coming to us now, which is why we're having to turn them way because there aren't enough people that have these skills right now. That's why I want to encourage the students out there, really. You know we were talking about this at lunch. Don't concentrate in one place. What I always hear... I went through the broadcast sequence, but I also worked at the Daily Texan the entire time. But at the Daily Texan, while I was reporting, I was also doing my own graphics for my stories. So, you know I'm bouncing around all over the place. The broadcast sequence also taught

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

me it wasn't just TV but also radio too. So we learned how to do the audio editing – everything that was needed.

So, ultimately, when the time came for the New York Times to start looking for people to do this stuff with the Flash program and the rest of that stuff, you know, there aren't that many people that are around right now. That's why I want to encourage you guys to get into this business – because it's needed and it most importantly, it's fun, all right.

So, don't limit yourself to one sequence or anything like that. The job, like I said, ten years ago, had not been created for me. Whatever job you guys end up doing in ten years is going to be radically different from what I'm doing and you guys are doing to do such wonderful work and I can't wait to see it. Good luck and Hook 'em Horns.

LEAH GENTRY: (inaudible)

MICHAEL SILBERMAN: Gary asked a bunch of interesting questions about, you know, whether interactivity is worth it and what we know about what works in interactivity, so, uh, my presentation is about exactly that. Uh, what we've learned at MSNBC, about what works in interactivity, um, and how we've evolved some very, very rich interactive presentation to take advantage of that learning.

I'm going to start by just playing a little bit of this big picture that we've done. We've done about four of these rather complex multimedia presentations - and just watch it for a few seconds. I'll skip to a couple of interesting parts. ...Where is the audio...

ELECTRONIC AUDIO: FEMALE VOICE...in the lower, right-hand corner of your screen. Time now for MSNBC.com's movie critic (inaudible) to handicap this year's races. You're welcome to jump in at any time and ask him a few follow-up questions. Simply select one for the menu in the lower right-hand corner of your screen. **MALE VOICE**...or *Groundhog Day*, it's almost like a *Saturday Night Live* curse. Bill Murray, I think still has a good chance but I think that category's just really hard to pick because they're all pretty strong. I wouldn't leave out Johnny Depp because he's long over due for an Oscar nomination and every once in awhile they'll go for something like that – it's very slapsticky, comic performance. Jude Law's probably the only one that definitely has a good chance because *Cold Mountain* didn't get that much of a warm reception. ...There's plenty more *Big Picture* ahead. Here's what's coming up – you can rearrange this (inaudible) any way you like. We'll also be asking your opinion throughout the show, so keep those comments coming. And here's a running list of your (inaudible) information. You can sort it by fax, (inaudible), or comments from other viewers. Take a moment to explore these features while we bring you this brief message from our sponsor.

MICHAEL SILBERMAN: I'm going to just let this play and then launch into my presentation. So, why do we do these rather complicated storytelling, interactive things that take about a month to produce, rely heavily on one person who is particularly smart and skilled about this stuff? Although we're trying to broaden it out beyond the one person – and we can only do them, we've been doing them for about 18 months and in that time span we've only done four of them, so don't have a real production profit in place for doing something this elaborate.

We do them for a bunch of reasons. We do them because, like all of what we do in interactivity, we believe in interactivity. We think that it's an important part of the web. We think that creating immersive storytelling experiences for our users is an important

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

capability of the medium and we're committed to continuing to advance that and experiment with that. We think it's a great way to engage the user and we have some real results that demonstrate that it does engage the user. As I said, we're committed to inventing new stuff and to giving our staff the opportunity to flex their creative muscles and push the medium forward.

Big Picture, in particular, is an evolution from whole series of earlier narrative forms that played around with a bunch of these ideas and Big Picture is sort of the coalescence of many of those ideas together into one format. The key attributes, in particular Big Picture, but in general for any kind of rich interactivity, we think our Control, which is giving the user control. Depth – the ability to dig deeper into something, introspection and interaction, the chance to get the user involved in the story in some way. Community – getting the user not only involved by interacting with it but giving the user a chance to feedback and have their feedback reflected in what other users see subsequently, so our users contribute to the story and we also think that it aids comprehension - that doing this kind of rich interactivity makes it easier to understand.

Some details on some of this... On Control – having the navigation really clear, making it easy to find your way around it. You remember the menu along the side, the controls along the bottom, all of that stuff – having that well exposed and having it very clear, clearly clickable – all that, very important. And then giving people visual cues.

You saw I moused over the toolbar and a little window popped up – the tool tip popped up saying you know, “here's how you use this thing.” So, giving people visual cues and also actually, a narrative piece like this, some audio cues to prompt them about what to do next also is very important. I'm not going to show you any of these examples but I think they're going to post them on the website so you can go and check out some of these other examples.

In terms of depth, giving people the opportunity to dig deeper, sort of stop the presentation and dig deeper, play more, hear, you know, ask the follow up questions. You saw that was one of the opportunities you could do in the Big Picture I was showing means that you can have a nice narrative but you can give the user moments to interrupt the narrative and participate.

There are a few different models that we played around with. “Opt Out,” the presentation stops and then the user has to actually do something to keep it moving ahead. There are pro's and cons to that. “Opt In,” giving, pausing, or giving people an opportunity to jump in if they want and stop it and do that asking of the follow up question or digging deeper into some other piece of interactivity. And then “Supplemental,” that's the related info panel at the bottom. We tell you about other things you might want to find out about that are related to this but you don't necessarily have to jump in right then and do it. It doesn't interrupt the presentation.

Introspection: we want to challenge our users to think about an issue. We hope, Oscars maybe isn't the greatest example of this but we've done Big Pictures about elections and about the lead up to the war in Iraq. We hope that we're going to, that our users are going to learn something from it, from our journalism, from using one of these Big Pictures. So, challenging them to think about the issue, giving them information, posing a question, asking them to vote – to weigh in. All of those are opportunities to engage the user in what we're doing and give them more benefit from our journalism.

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

As I mentioned, Community, before – opportunity for users comments to become part of the story and part of our presentation of the story.

...And then finally, comprehension. Our view is, I'm not sure we really have clear data about this, but our view is that an active user – somebody that's engaged in, you know, watching a presentation and participating in it because we prompt them, we stop it, we prompt them, we give them opportunities to dig in or move on. We think that they're going to learn more than somebody who is just passively reading an article or perhaps sitting back and watching a video piece – that the immersive nature of this presentation really aids comprehension.

So, a few things about this latest one that we've done, uh, that are a little different from previous Big Pictures... Um, there was, uh, an introduction on the launch page itself – I didn't play it but you saw that video window, actually a Flash window of our anchor. She introduces the Big Picture at the beginning and so it's a way to sort of prompt you into it, um, to hopefully drive people off that launch page into the experience more effectively than just having a button and some text.

Um, we also gave multiple entry points, which is something that we hadn't done before. There were four different things that you could choose to start the presentation or you could just click the Big Launch button at the bottom. Not surprisingly we think that people click the Launch button, although it's a little confounded. I'll explain that in a second.

The window size is larger so that we can have still a very large content space but with enough space for a banner ad at the bottom. Uh, this was the first one that we allowed you to reorder the play list so that users could actually change the order that they watched the presentation in. Um, we also, we'd had related information at the bottom of the screen before but the way that we did it in previous Big Pictures was it would sort of change as the presentation went on and fade in and fade out and you could save a link for later or save a bit of information for later, but you couldn't go back and scroll through it. There was no way, once something had disappeared, if you hadn't taken action it that moment there was no way for you to, uh, to go back and find it again if you wanted to later.

Um, so we made it persistent and we also made the option to hide some of the boxes on the bottom so that if you didn't want to see the related info or you didn't want to see our anchor, just hear her, then you could that.

So, what did we learn about how our users were engaged in this? We have a few different ways that we measured user engagement. One is time spent. And it really breaks down into sort of three big buckets - about a third, a third, a third. There are some folks who, for whatever reason, went in and immediately went back out again. They spent less than a minute on it and we think that's probably because they, you know, didn't like what they saw, they had trouble loading it, you know, who knows. We don't know exactly why they bailed out but they bailed out very quickly. We're thinking about doing some sort of a thing where if they bail out really quickly we pop up a thing saying, "Hey! Why'd you bail out?" Um, so we're eager to learn more about that.

Um, another third spent about less than five minutes in it. So, they go engaged, they watched part of whatever that first piece was that they'd cued up, but for whatever reason bailed out of it after that period of time.

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

But then another third spent more than five minutes in it, which when you think about spending more than five minutes with any single thing on a website, is a rather incredible bit of data and the fact that 10% spent 15 minutes or more with it, is stunning. When you think about the fact that even for the New York Times the total time online for a month for one of their users averages something in the 30-40 minute range, 15 minutes in a single piece of content is quite stunning.

Another way to look at user engagement is how many segments did they watch? So about half watched a single segment and we already know that a good chunk of those bailed out after watching that single segment – they didn't watch the whole segment through. Um, cause they spent most of their minute in it.

Um, then, uh, as you can see, 21% saw two segments. That means they stayed through the ad to watch those two segments because in every case, no matter what you're entry point was, you, the, immediately after the first segment you saw an ad. Um, so in fact, in the aggregate, you probably can't see this but 48%, anybody that stayed, you know, past two segments or more, saw the ad. So 48% of the audience saw the ad, which obviously our advertising folks think is very, very interesting.

Um, the last, uh, measure of user engagement is time spent in a particular segment. Um, so, um, the way we measured it was percent of segment watched and it's a little bit of an artificial measure because each segment was divided up into blocks that varied from one segment to another depending on where the transitions were in the segments, but in the aggregate it's a pretty good way to look at it.

Again it divided up roughly a third, a third, a third. 30% watched between 1% and 20% of a given segment – this is on average for all the segments. Then, 36% watched between 21% and 99% so about a third watched somewhere between 20% and nearly all of it. And 34%, and again this to me is a stunning measure of engagement for this thing, 34% watched 100% of a given segment, on average.

So, again, we think people are really, really immersing themselves in this kind of presentation and to answer Gary's question from before, to us that's worth it.

So, talk about the entry points for a second. So there were five different ways to get into this. You could click on any of those four boxes or you could click the Big Launch button at the bottom. 52% either clicked the Launch button or went in on that "Our Critics Take." We were measuring what segment they started on, as opposed to measuring click through on this page, so we don't know exactly what the proportion was but we assume a lot more actually clicked the Launch button than click the Critics one.

29% picked the Red Carpet Fashion one. And my guess is that was beside the Launch button, that that was actually the highest choice on the page that people were particularly interested in that one. And then 8% watched the Indie Films and 11% watched the ranking of the nominees.

In terms of segment popularity – so here's the sort of default order of the play list – you can't see the bottom but the default order of the play list – if you click the Launch button, as opposed to clicking one of those other entry points with that order, in terms of popularity, again, because it had that 52% entry point, the Critics Take was number one but then supporting actor was number four. The Red Carpet Fashion was the second most popular segment to watch and the numbers that we've got suggest that it wasn't

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

just that people were clicking on that entry point, although a lot of them were. It was also that people were perhaps skipping ahead to ahead to that Dress the Actors, Dress the Nominee one.

The other sort of interesting thing about the segment popularity is what level of interaction we saw. So on the "Critics Take" the interaction you could do was to ask a follow up question. Nobody asked a follow up question. People were just not interested in that. That was something that we were convinced was going to be a really popular feature – you know, don't you always want to ask a follow up question? You know, find out more about this? Nobody cares.

The most interaction we saw was on "Dress Up A Nominee" one, and I'll play that in a second so you can see why it was so popular and why the level of interaction was so high. And then the other ones sort of distribute out in the, you know, 5-11% range in terms of level of interaction and the interaction was in terms of reordering the nominees and then voting on it – submitting your vote for what you thought was going to be the winner.

Last light here, cause I know we need to move along. Some other really interesting things about how people used the Big Picture. 52% used the play list, which is huge. I mean, think about that, 52% used the navigation in this thing, played around in it, clicked to jump ahead, do something like that. 15% actually reordered it. Again, I think that's a stunningly big number. When you think about click through on websites, you know, our navigation on our MSNBC site, we don't have the data since we did the redesign, but before the redesign on our main navigation the click through was about 10%.

Send a Comment – less than 1%. Again, there are certain users who want to do that. That's one of those, it's the old community ratio – you know the post to the view ratio. A lot more people look at this stuff than actually post – it still has value. 14% used the related info, clicked, scrolled in that area. Again, that seems like a really high number to us.

And then here's the one that puzzles us and we need to dig into a little bit, is the 24% hid the guide. Now, we don't know whether they hid the guide and then unhid her again, cause we didn't look at whether people were un hiding the guide. We just know that they clicked that "hide" button at some point or unhide and 24% were doing that. So we want to understand more why they were hiding the guide and a little bit more about that.

So let me just quickly show you – (background noise) – Ok – let's go to the Red Carpet Fashion one.

(Background audio – Female Voice...on the red carpet. In a moment, you'll have a chance to dress one of Hollywood's hottest stars, but first MSNBC's own gossip columnist Jeannette Wells separates the fashions from the faux pas. New Voice: Oscar night is not all about awards. When those stars strut down the red carpet, it's the hottest catwalk of the year. All the top designers will be crowding to dress the most fabulous stars, like Renee Zellweger. So listen up Renee, you're going to have a lot of choices to make and here are some tips. Let's start with the gown. Two words of advice, think glam. That's the look right now and for inspiration you can turn to fellow Oscar contender Charlise Theron. This year (inaudible) it's time to put it all together. Ladies, chose your favorite ensemble. C'mon guys, tap into your inner metrosexual and help Renee look fabulous. Then hit the "done" button to see what the other viewers chose.)

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

So this is a fun segment. It had a nice bit of interactivity that was very, very easy to use. You know, you choose a hairstyle, you choose a dress, you choose some shoes – obviously, I'm not a stylist here. And then you click the "done" button.

(Female Voice: "Here's what Renee would wear if our viewers all had equal say." "Yikes" "You can keep up with all the latest celebrity gossip throughout the week as Jeanette delivers the scoop at scoop.MSNBC.com.")

So, anyway, there you go, that's the Big Picture in depth and gives you a little bit of a sense of the thinking, some of the learning that we've done and some of what works about it.

LEAH GENTRY: Ok, don't go away Michael. First of all, does anybody from the audience want to ask a question?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Just a quick one. Was that "yikes" written into the script in advance and was it going to play regardless of what the audience selected?

MICHAEL SILBERMAN: I believe it was.

LEAH GENTRY: Ok, also, you can take questions for either Naka or Gary. Please identify yourself and identify who the question is for too, ok.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yeah, I'm a graduate student here, (inaudible)...

LEAH GENTRY: You guys want to come up to the table?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: ...about the Big Picture, do you analyze what group of audience will like the (inaudible) most, like the Picture, you can change the outfit, the clothing?

MICHAEL SILBERMAN: Ask the question again, I'm sorry.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yeah, what group of readers or audiences will like this kind of design?

MICHAEL SILBERMAN: What kind of readers? We don't have any demographic information about who was using and you know what kind of person was using it.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: ...but according to you opinion, who are the target audiences?

MICHAEL SILBERMAN: Well, I mean, you know, conventional wisdom is that that sort of thing, that entertainment content, specifically Oscar related content, is going to appeal more to women than to men, but you know that's conventional wisdom. I – I don't know what people were actually doing on our site.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: My name is Mark Tremayne. I'm on the faculty here at the School of Journalism. Question for Michael Silberman. I liked some of the numbers that you presented. It was interesting and I agree with you that some of that, even if it's a smaller percentage, it's still very interesting that that many people do that. The one number that I was interested in though, that I don't think you gave was what percentage of the traffic at MSNBC that saw this thing actually went to it and clicked on it?

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

MICHAEL SILBERMAN: You know, there were something like, and I don't know what it is percentage wise, but -

AUDIENCE QUESTION (Mark Tremayne): - Typically in these kind of things it might be very, very small. So even though that what they did when they got there is interesting, how many of them actually got there?

MICHAEL SILBERMAN: Yeah, there were over 400,000 people that used this, which is pretty good for a special project like this. We had more usage for the one that we did on the Oscars last year. I think the usage was higher on that one and the usage was also higher on the one that we did on the lead up to the Iraq War last year. So, I think, how many people use it depends a lot on promotion so you know where it was placed, how long it was there, how prominent the link was, whether the link was on MSN, if the link was on MSN then a lot more people are going to use it so it's not necessarily a great gauge of the popularity of the form or the particular topic even since it depends so much on promotion, but obviously the Iraq War one was quite important and quite popular.

AUDIENCE QUESTION (Mark Tremayne): I was glad to hear you talk about the idea of Comprehension among, and how this sort of thing can be used to increase comprehension among, readers. I'm actually stunned that you mentioned that, frankly. Because often times you talk to professional journalists and you ask them, "Do you think about how to present your information in such a way that people will really learn from it and retain the information and be able to use it in their lives?" And they'll look at you with a blank stare like, "Well, we cover the news, you know, we put it out there and people do what they will." And so I was really actually heartened to hear you actually thought about the idea of presenting information in a way that people might benefit in an even more of a direct way of learning the information. I don't know if the rest the panelists have any thoughts on that, but one of the benefits that I've always seen in these sorts of interactive presentations of news is that - is the ability for the user to get a little more involved in the story and perhaps make the connections you were talking about between elements of that story or between, you know, things they already know and new things that you're presenting.

SPEAKER?: The other thing, I think this forum kind of lends itself to that kind of comprehension and it also, because you can instrument Flash very heavily and understand how people are moving through it and what they're clicking on and what they're not clicking on allows you to have some sense afterwards of whether your instincts about what might work and what might not work allows you test that. So we can get smarter about it.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: My name is Henry. I am a student here at UT. My question is for Michael. You have just mentioned you were puzzled why 24% hid the guide, but I believe when you build and provide this function you have a reason, you have a (inaudible). What do you think?

MICHAEL SILBERMAN: Well, I, we made it possible to hide any of the boxes on the bottom. All three of the boxes were able to be hidden. We only tracked whether people were hiding the guide or not so that was probably a mistake. We should have checked whether people were hiding any of the other boxes. So that's a data point that we're missing.

2004—International Symposium on Online Journalism

AUDIENCE QUESTION (Henry): ...you were not expecting any percentage...

MICHAEL SILBERMAN: Well, we were particularly curious about the guide and how people felt about the guide and whether the guide was a distraction. There are some things that don't work very well about the guide. The biggest one is that her lips...