The Story of MediaCenter: Using Rich Media to Grow an Online Audience

MediaCenter on denverpost.com was born in 2007 out of a simple desire to organize web content created by the photography department. Today, the website showcases photo galleries, videos, graphics, multimedia special projects, audio and a number of photography blogs. The site has become a valuable piece of denverpost.com, driving web growth for The Denver Post since 2006. Rich media on denverpost.com garnered 620,000 hits in 2006. At the end of 2011, MediaCenter's fifth complete year in operation, rich media on the site accounted for more than 100 million page views.

I began working on MediaCenter in 2007 when I was hired by The Denver Post as a Multimedia Photo Editor. I had been studying online multimedia audiences and producing rich media projects for a year prior to joining The Post. Photographers and Photo Editors at the newspaper were spending more time developing and producing online content with limited results in growing and audience for the work.

Prior to 2007, special projects or series were designed and organized for the print product. Time, money and newsroom resources were poured into important stories that took months, and sometimes years, to report. Online, the stories were copies of the print product and made little to no use of the storytelling tools unique to the web. In addition, multimedia was an afterthought without adequate planning or involvement in the initial project meetings. As MediaCenter continued to grow, special projects published through the site reached a new audience looking for high-end photojournalism and web storytelling. Online projects, like Ian Fisher: American Soldier, were conceived specifically for the website. Instead of reporting the

story for print and adapting it for the web, we conceived and developed the project thinking of the web first. This changed the way we told the story, from how we organized the series to how the viewer interacted with the project.

Before the creation of MediaCenter in 2007, photography, videography and rich, interactive media did not have a home on the website, instead, it floated from article page to article page, acting as secondary content to the written word. Visual storytelling was not a priority which was evident on the website.

The immediate challenge the photography department faced was how to make the existing technology in the newsroom work for us. As the department began to create and publish rich media on a regular basis, links to the projects were collected on an article page built and housed within the content management system (CMS) used by the online department to populate denverpost.com. DASH, as the CMS is called, was developed in 2003, before Facebook, Twitter and the world of social media existed and well before the launch of Wordpress, the most popular blogging software in the world. It was quickly apparent that the in-house technology available in the newsroom was incapable of properly showcasing rich media.

At first, we tried to build our own rich media publishing tools, like slideshow and audio players, video players, and interactive Flash projects. We had some success, growing our views from 620,000 hits in 2006 to 2.9 million in 2007, but building these tools and manually coding each project was time intensive and inefficient. For each video, slideshow or project, about a quarter of the time it took to create the project was spent publishing to the website. Traffic counters and searchable data was manually coded into the players and pages.

The key to MediaCenter's success was moving the content outside of the outdated newsroom content management system and into free or very inexpensive systems available online. We employed SlideShowPro to organize and manage all our photos for slideshows and multimedia projects. We abandoned Flash in favor of a Wordpress blog with a custom theme and search engine optimization. With these changes, everyone in the photography department became an online content producer. No longer were specialized coding skills a requirement to publish content on the website.

The quantity and quality of content can become the highest priority once a photography department embraces user friendly, search engine optimized and easily updatable publishing tools. Viewers respond to quality content that is consistently updated. MediaCenter features local, national and international photography. We publish approximately twenty photo galleries a day, showcasing both staff and wire photographs. Every gallery is curated by photo editors in the photography department.

Once an audience is established, content producers must give viewers a reason to keep coming back to the site. At The Denver Post, we did this by focusing on the speed with which photo galleries are posted, paying close attention to what the audience is searching for, emphasizing the correct search terms and keywords for each MediaCenter post and by prioritizing and planning multimedia content collection from the onset of long-term projects and special reports.

Newspaper websites place a huge emphasis on speed in posting written breaking news. This should be true for the visual storytelling as well. When local, national or international news breaks, a photo gallery should be posted as quickly as the story. In the minutes after a story

breaks, our online audience comes to MediaCenter for the visual report. The speed with which photos and videos are published is the difference between a few thousands clicks and a hundred thousand clicks. Videographers are dispatched to breaking news events to produce quick, short videos to be posted immediately online and then, if needed, to produce a more in-depth video for publication later in the day.

In May of 2006, Google released its trend reports as a way to visualize and project the popularity of Google searches over time. The department began relying on the trend reports in 2009 as a way to better understand what the online audience wanted. Photo gallery producers check the trend report multiple times a day for ideas on new galleries and the producers use SEO to make sure the audience finds our posts based on the search terms used.

Early on in the life of MediaCenter, we realized the power of social media and the opportunities to grow our audience with content sharing. Every photo gallery, video and special project is accompanied by social media buttons in prominent positions on the page. People trust recommendations from their online network of friends because their friends have similar interests and backgrounds. Those recommendations bring new viewers to MediaCenter and continue to increase the audience of the website.

Building an online audience for rich media on a newspaper website increases the value of the photography department in the newsroom. Everyone in The Denver Post's photography department is a content producer, including the photo editors and the imaging technicians, and is an essential contributor to the digital operation of the newsroom.

In an age where display space for photographs in the print paper is decreasing, the possibilities for online storytelling are endless. Places like MediaCenter offer photography departments a way to connect with audiences who are hungry for rich media content.