

## **The Next Step in Interactive News: Social Networking and User-Generated Video**

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### **About this project**

This project started out as an effort to introduce editorial video to the Web site of American University's student newspaper, The Eagle. The project, my senior honors capstone, was the opportunity to apply what I had learned as a print journalism major to the emerging convergent media landscape.

Before long, the project expanded into something much larger than just shooting, editing and posting videos. I saw the potential for video commentary as a new and dynamic platform for communication among news media and consumers. I wanted to look into how video commentary was being used, who was using it and why the mainstream media wasn't on board yet.

I also started a Facebook page for The Eagle, originally as a way for students to send in video commentary. This led me to question how the mainstream news media was using social networking sites, especially Facebook, as platforms for disseminating their product to their consumers. With most traffic to news Web sites coming in laterally, not through the home page, social networking sites seem like obvious spots to place entry points to drive users to news content. They are also proven spaces for developing community and creating conversation.

During the course of the project, I interviewed ten experts in convergent and college media, read dozens of articles and blog posts about the topics, and figured out some things on my own through my experiences with The Eagle.

This article includes the objectives, methodology, background information, results and conclusions of the project. Although these are discussed in detail below, my main conclusions are that:

- Video commentary offers users a more personal way to connect with one another. Even though it sacrifices the anonymity that so many enjoy online, it will become increasingly popular as technology for capturing, editing and posting video becomes cheaper, easier to

use and more widespread. The news media needs to be prepared to integrate user-generated video comments on their Web sites.

- Social networking sites are here to stay, and the news media should find ways to use them as platforms for community building and dialogue. If used well, social networking sites can drive traffic to other Web sites and can build a community of users who are loyal to the brand.

### **Project Objectives**

The original goal of this project was to encourage more dialogue between news organizations and the people formerly known as “readers.” (Now better known as “users,” which more accurately reflects their relationship with the news.)

With the guiding principle in place, the next step was to pick:

- 1) A format for the dialogue, and
- 2) A news organization to test the new format.

Video stood out as the best medium for advancing online news dialogue. I was inspired by Jennifer Crandall’s [onBeing](#) project for Washingtonpost.com and a friend’s “over-night” success with his YouTube channel, [EmergencyCheese](#), a vlog about political vlogging. These two projects are on the cutting-edge of online journalism. They demonstrate the unique ability video has for making people feel connected and for expressing personalities.

The idea for my project was to use online video as a medium for both broadcasting editorials and collecting user commentary. The job of guinea pig for the project fell to the American University student newspaper, The Eagle, and its special projects editor, me.

The aim was to build a wider and more engaged audience for [theeagleonline.com](#), the newspaper’s Web site. The user commentary videos are a Webified version of traditional letters-

to-the-editor. The old-school text versions are infrequent at The Eagle, only one to two per week on average, according to Tony Romm, the editorial page editor.

But comments to stories on the Web site are more common. In March, 43 comments were made on some of the 163 articles posted that month on theeagleonline.com. Not too shabby for a semiweekly college newspaper with an average online readership of 5,600 people, according to Ken Rosenauer, president of [College Media Advisers](#) and a professor at Missouri Western State University.

Online video looked like a promising medium for increasing user interaction on a news Web site like The Eagle's. Video offered something new and more personalized. Although video is widely available on sites like YouTube and Google Video, most major news' sites are not calling for user-generated video commentary just yet.

### **Methodology for Eagle video and Facebook presence**

To execute the Eagle video project—producing video editorials and setting up the Web site to collect user-generated video commentary—a team had to be built to handle the various technical aspects of the project. Jake Paul, The Eagle's Webmaster, was brought on board to design and build the [video page](#) for the Web site. He also assisted in the initial set-up of a page for The Eagle on Facebook.

Tony Romm was recruited to be the on-air talent for the videos. As the editorial page editor, he is the voice of the editorial board, and he helped me write the scripts for the videos. Ethan Klapper, the Web editor, assisted in the daily posting of the videos and taught me the basics about editing in Final Cut Pro. I produced, captured and edited the weekly videos and then uploaded them to Google Video and The Eagle's Facebook page every Wednesday night from March 26 to April 23.

I had each video critiqued by The Eagle staff and AU professors and then applied what I learned to improve the subsequent videos. For example, I added multiple camera angles and a graphic to the week two video and made the shot tighter, leaving less room in the frame around the speaker's face, in the week three video.

The [Facebook page](#) was updated every time a new issue came out so that the photo displayed was the front page of the newspaper. An RSS feed on the page displayed the most recent content on the Web site. Every video was posted on the page, and several photo albums were added. I sent out updates to fans a few times during the semester to encourage them to watch the videos and submit their own video commentary.

### **YouTube, CNN's iReport and the future of online video commentary**

A ticker in the top, right-hand corner of [iReport.com](#) counts off the number of submissions worldwide of photos, videos and audio recordings. April 27 at 2:30 p.m., the counter reads 102,423.

CNN launched iReport in August 2006, after their news room was bombarded by photos and videos taken by users during the Asian Tsunami, according to Lila King, a senior producer at CNN.com who leads the user participation group that oversees iReport.

For the first year and half, CNN was taking the submissions, vetting them for accuracy and then choosing which ones to post online. Then in February 2008 they launched a separate iReport Web site. The intention was to develop a depository for user-generated news —“Unedited. Unfiltered. News.” according to the site's tagline. The user-generated content no longer had to go through editors at CNN. It was published to the Web site immediately.

Most of the videos posted by users never make it past their little place on iReport.com, but a select few are featured on [CNN.com](#) and even on the cable news station. Since the site

launched, CNN has used more than 700 stories from iReport.com on other platforms, according to King. But the purpose of iReport was not just to collect free material for CNN.

“The idea of iReport is that it facilitates peoples engagement with the news,” said King. “News is more than what we as professional editors deem as important...It’s what happens to people and what people are talking about.”

Most of the stories posted on iReport.com are photos or audio, but video is becoming a greater percentage of the content, increasing from 1-in-20 posts to about 1-in-10, said King. A lot of the user-generated content is focused on news, especially weather, obituaries and breaking news, but CNN has started [asking for video comments](#) on some of the story pages on CNN.com. This is a big step since text comments only started appearing on story pages in July 2007 when the site was redesigned.

So far the response to video comments has been luke-warm, according to King, who said the feature was “not the most popular thing on CNN.com.” Political stories seem to attract the most video commentary. King hypothesized that posting a video comment takes a greater commitment on the part of the user than a text comment, and maybe with the election season in full swing, users feel more committed to political stories than general interest news.

“To take that step takes having really thought about something and being able to articulate your opinion on it,” said King, who likened video comments to essays.

All the other experts interviewed agreed. Capturing, editing and uploading video is more time consuming than posting a text comment, even if you have the tools and know-how to use video—and not many people do. But the time is quickly approaching when more people will have access to video capturing devices and familiarity with posting video to the Web, which will streamline the process for users.

Thanks to advances like the MacBook with its built-in camera and cell phones that can capture video, online video will probably become more widespread within the next two years, according to Robert Niles, a professor at the University of Southern California and editor of the school's [Online Journalism Review](#).

Video chat networks, like [paltalk](#), have already taken off outside the United States. People in Japan and Europe have been using their cell phones to capture video much longer than Americans. This head-start means that they are also more comfortable with using video, says Amy Webb, a digital strategy consultant. But Americans are starting to catch up.

"You're going to see an explosion of user-generated video," said Niles. "And that's so easy to see that any smart news organization better be making plans for it."

The gap between text comments and video comments might be narrowing already, according to a [study](#) recently released by the Newspaper Association of America. The study found that a little less than a third of respondents reported having made a text comment in the past month, and more than 20 percent said they had used a video-sharing option on a Web site. When asked specifically about newspaper sites, only 7 percent of respondents said they had posted a text comment in the past month, and 3 percent had used a video-sharing option.

The study shows that people are using video to express themselves. They just aren't doing it on news sites. Most of the user-generated video traffic is going to sites like [YouTube](#), a wide-open, internet space where users can create their own "channel" and broadcast their own message.

YouTube has even given rise to a new generation of YouTube celebrities, like Amber Lee Ettinger, a model and actress better known as Obama Girl, whose music video "[I got a](#)

[crush...on Obama](#)” has been viewed more than 8 million times and is nominated for a [Webby Award](#) in the viral video category.

James Kotecki was also able to use YouTube to gain some fame, at least among the politically inclined. His YouTube channel, [EmergencyCheese](#), is a vlog about political vlogging and has about 4,000 subscribers. His big claim to fame are his video interviews with presidential hopefuls like Ron Paul, Mike Gravel, Mike Huckabee and John Edwards. Paul even showed up at Kotecki’s dorm room at Georgetown University to be interviewed.

Sites like YouTube might be facilitating video sharing, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they are creating forums for intelligent dialogue about important issues, says Webb. Webb said most of the content on sites like YouTube is parody or a cry for attention.

“I don’t see a category emerging that is ‘Hey, I think I have something important to say,’” said Webb. “I don’t think we’re quite there yet, and I don’t know if we’re going to get there.”

If people do decide to start using video for serious idea sharing, not just comedy and marketing, there are benefits. Video commentary is closer to the way people normally interact face-to-face because it allows for nonverbal communication that is lost with text, says Kotecki, who now anchors the daily online show “Kotecki” (formerly “PlaybookTV”) for [Politico.com](#).

“The power of video, I think, is far greater than the power of text,” said Kotecki. “You know the tone of the person’s voice, you see the expression on their face.”

Catherine Andrews, a masters fellow at CNN when they were starting iReport in 2006, echoed that sentiment when discussing the place video has to play in the news dialogue.

“Video adds another layer, an element, as far as being invested in what a person is saying,” said Andrews. “You get a lot more context. I think it’s a deeper connection.”



But added personality means lost anonymity, and not everyone is willing to give up being “faceless” online. Video commentary, although definitely growing, probably will never reach the level of text commentary for this reason, says Ju-Don Marshall Roberts, managing editor of [Washingtonpost.com](http://Washingtonpost.com). Some people just aren’t ready to broadcast themselves to the world.

### **Social networking and the news media**

Last month The Economist used Facebook to find people who were willing to record their lives as “digital nomads” for a [special report](#). Two weeks ago Chicago RedEye, the Chicago Tribune's free daily tabloid, launched a Facebook application that lets users answer sports questions, with some of the funniest responses ending up in the paper.

These are just a few examples of mainstream news organizations that are venturing into the world of social networking in order to promote their product and to engage with users. A plethora of social networking sites are available, from [LinkedIn](#) to [MySpace](#). But most of the buzz has been around Facebook, which lets people create applications and pages for a product or company.

Some news companies have been very successful in using Facebook to market their product. The New York Times has over 15,000 fans on its [Facebook page](#), and every day almost 700 people use the News Quiz application, a five-question quiz on the topics covered in that day’s New York Times. And these Facebook users aren’t just staying on Facebook.

The New York Times has seen an increase in traffic among users going from Facebook to NYTimes.com since it launched the profile page last fall, as well as an increase in the number of its articles being shared among Facebook users, according to a [Poynter Online interview](#) with Stacey Green, manager of internal communications and public relations for The Times Company.

Newspapers and social networking sites share a sizable audience, according to a [2007 report](#) from the Newspaper Association of America. The report cites data from Nielson NetView that shows that 23 percent of NYTimes.com visitors are on Facebook, and 16 percent of Facebook members are NYTimes.com users. Social network users are big media consumers, according to the report.

A fallacy being spread around the news business is that young people don't consume news and information, said Roberts.

"They absolutely do. They just consume it in a different way," said Roberts, referring to people who get their news from Facebook or other social networking sites. "With that many people who are actively using it [Facebook] as a way to communicate, let's get out there...Let's take our content to where they are."

For this reason Facebook pages and applications are going to become a bigger part of newsroom strategies in the future, said Ellyn Angelotti, interactivity editor and adjunct faculty at The Poynter Institute. When someone "fans" a page on Facebook, all of their friends can see that they are a fan, and this increases the friends' interest in that product, said Angelotti. The effect is the same as when a friend tells you about a cool new gadget they bought—you're more likely to buy it because your friend recommended it.

Some media experts are skeptical about news organizations rushing to put themselves on Facebook. Most news companies are still struggling to develop user-friendly Web sites with good content, external links, archives and search functions, said Webb.

"In some cases I think it is more detrimental to put yourself out there," said Webb. "It's only going to help as much as the content is relevant and recent and rich on a company's Web site."

But a lot of companies are setting up Facebook pages because its free and its easy. The problem is not everyone is following through with the upkeep and the innovation. After a few weeks of ignoring it, the Facebook page can actually become damaging to the brand, said Niles.

Facebook pages might not even be the best way for news companies to utilize the potential of the social networking site, according to Matthew Greenberg, a product manager at Gannett. Letting Facebook users tag stories and other news products and pass them on to their friends is the best way to tap into the power of those relationships, said Greenberg.

“It’s about making it as easy as possible for your content to spread through [social networking sites] like little tentacles,” said Greenberg.

Now...what if this is all just a fad?

Webb warned that as the Facebook users of today grow up and get jobs, they will spend less and less time on Facebook, and maybe that is true. But even the downturn of Facebook can’t kill social networking, said Niles. Users might grow out of Facebook, but they will continue to use social networking sites that connect them to the people they want to be connected to, said Niles.

This means that successful news organizations need to have diverse journalists participating in diverse communities, online and off, said Niles.

“If you’ve got that, then you’ve covered your bases,” said Niles.

### **Results from Eagle Video and The Eagle Facebook page**

The Eagle Video project had mixed results. Only one video was submitted by a user during the five weeks the project ran this semester, but the editorial videos I produced were viewed a considerable number of times on Facebook and theeagleonline.com.

(At the time of writing, Facebook does not keep running totals for the number of video views. The site only shows the views for the previous two days. Google Video, where we store our videos before we embed them on our Web site, is experiencing problems with their report function. Two weeks ago the report was showing about 15 views per video, but this week it says the videos have never been viewed.)

Other metrics also show that there is interest in the project on campus. Last month several students posted messages on the Daily Jolt, an American University online discussion board, about the staff-produced videos. First the postings were derogatory, but subsequent posters defended the videos and said they enjoyed them. ATV, American University's television station, approached The Eagle to ask if the newspaper would consider partnering with them to do news programming for the station.

As discussed above, user-generated video is harder to gather than text comments because there is a higher cost in time and effort for users to submit video comments than text comments. Not many people have the capability to capture video, and few are familiar with the process.

There needs to be an incentive for the user to go from consumer to contributor, said David Johnson, a professor at American University and chief technology officer of Scripps Media Center in Washington, DC. That incentive could come from users wanting others in their community (AU) to hear what they have to say, but Eagle Video needs to become a recognized part of the brand that people are watching regularly for this to be an incentive.

Eagle Video might need more time to develop this brand recognition to establish credibility and interest. Johnson suggested that projects on the Web need to run for at least a year in order to determine their success or failure. Especially considering the viral nature of information dissemination on the Web, it takes time for new products to build a loyal audience.

The Eagle will continue the project next semester, with Romm taking over as special projects editor. A new position has been added for a multimedia editor, who will shoot and edit the videos. At the end of next year, we might be in a better position to evaluate the success or failure of Eagle Video.

The most successful and efficient component of the project, in terms of people reached and time demands on the staff, is the Facebook page that was originally created as a depository for the videos. This page has more than 100 fans and gets about 15 unique page views a day. Users are also looking at the photo galleries and watching the videos from the Facebook page as they are posted.

The best example of the success of the Facebook page is the wall posts. When users posted questions and I responded to the questions, traffic to the Facebook page jumped to the highest levels it ever reached after the initial surge of new users.

Facebook provides a free platform that requires relatively little upkeep for reaching a target audience. If the mainstream media is using Facebook to reach college-age students, there is no excuse for college media not to use it to reach their primary audience.

### **Conclusions: Lessons for the news media**

The lessons learned from this project were broader than the immediate success or failure of Eagle Video. This project was an in-depth look at the potential for the mainstream media to use video commentary and social networking sites like Facebook to engage their users in dialogue and to promote their product in an innovative and converged medium.

After conducting the Eagle Video project, researching the topics and interviewing numerous experts in convergent media, I came to the following conclusions about the future potential for news organizations to use video commentary and social networking sites.

Video allows for more depth of conversation because non-verbal communication is lost in text comments. With video, users are able to see and hear what other people are thinking, which adds personality to communication. Even if video never becomes as prolific as text comments, this added dimension in video commentary makes it a valuable addition to the news dialogue.

Online video is an immerging medium for communication. The Newspaper Association of America [study](#) discussed above shows that more than 20 percent of users are already participating in video sharing online on a regular basis. They just aren't doing it on news Web sites. User-generated video will become more widespread in the near future as advances in technology and software make it more accessible and easier to use.

Video comments might never reach the level of text comments because users have to sacrifice anonymity in video. But a new generation of media users, who grew up broadcasting themselves on the Internet, could change online commenting. News organizations need to embrace user generated video early.

“You got to be ready kind of journalistically and content-wise to figure out how to do these things...before the business may be there,” said Jim Brady, executive editor of Washingtonpost.com in a video interview with Beet.tv. “Because you don’t want to get caught flat-footed when the business shows up, and I think it will on video.”

News organizations need to utilize social networking sites as platforms for disseminating their content and building community. The infrastructure has already been built. The news companies just need to take a service that is free and easy to use and invest a little time in finding innovative ways to use social networks. Upkeep is minimal but essential for maintaining the

brand's image. If the news organization cannot guarantee that the content on the Facebook page will be kept current, then they should not start it.

Most users do not go to a news Web site's homepage. They get their news through links, e-mails, text messages and social networks. The news media needs to adapt and put the content where the people already are. They need to make it easy for the user to consume their news.

Social networking sites also add the extra benefit of virtual friend recommendation. People want to read what other people they know are reading, they want to watch what they're watching. Users are more likely to buy what a friend recommends, and this works online as well.

Video commentary and social networking sites represent two mediums with great potential that the mainstream news media has yet to tap. In a converged world, news organizations cannot afford to continue the way they are going. They have to adapt.

Kate Naseef

### **News media Facebook fan pages**

This is a sample of news organizations that are using Facebook pages. During the month of April, every one of these Facebook pages experienced an increase in fans. NPR had the greatest increase, with more than 5,000 Facebook users fanning the page in April alone.

#### **[NPR](#)**

Fans: 29,607

Wall Posts: 134

Widget: Podcast Player (66 daily active users)

The content on this page is mainly in the RSS feeds and the Podcast Player, where you can listen to NPR shows right from Facebook. There are not photos or video, but there are 23 Fan reviews, all but one of which are devoted fans that love NPR.

#### **[The Economist](#)**

Fans: 11,853

Wall Posts: 128

Widget: The Economist US Election 2008 (7 daily active users)

This page includes a description of recent features and an image of the current cover in the Extended Info section at the top of the page. Other than the election widget (which is basically an RSS feed in a nicely-designed box), this page mainly sticks to standard Facebook applications on its page: photos, video, discussion boards, wall posts and a Simply RSS feed. Photo albums and video have been posted fairly recently, although there are only three of each.

The Economist used Facebook to recruit “digital nomads-- people who use mobile technology to pull in the information they need, as they move.” These nomads documented their lives and were featured in a special Economist report on mobile technology.

#### **[The New York Times](#)**

Fans: 15,080

Wall Posts: 135

Widget: News Quiz (723 daily active users); Most E-mailed Articles (103 daily active users)

This page has more content than any of the other mainstream media Facebook Fan pages. There is a new photo album posted almost every day. (Two hundred in all, dating back to early November 2007). There multiple RSS feeds (maybe too many actually, it gets a little cluttered) and an application that displays the most e-mailed articles. (Wouldn't the most Facebook-shared articles be more relevant?) The video section is a little out of date, however. Only three videos have been posted, and the most recent one is over a month old.

#### **[Washingtonpost.com](#)**

Fans: 466

Wall Posts: 1



Widget: newsTracker (4 daily active users)

The Washington Post's page does not reflect the caliber of the news organization. There are two videos posted, both four months old. Then there are a handful of photo albums, thankfully they are more recently updated, and of course they have a scattering of RSS feeds. Part of the problem might be that if you search "Washington Post" on Facebook, the official page does not even come up in the search results. A not-so-official page does come up however, which has 117 fans.

### [Los Angeles Times](#)

Fans: 351

Wall Posts: 5

Widgets: None found

Not much content on this site, just one very old photo album and an RSS feed. No video, no discussion topics, not even a company overview.

### [Chicago Tribune](#)

Fans: 414

Wall Posts: 7

Widget: None found

Several photo albums from November, but nothing more recent. Looks like whoever set up the page finished their internship, and no one took over. Instead of the regular video application that comes standard on Facebook Fan pages, they have opted for a YouTube Box, which means that the user has to sign in to see their videos. The videos have been updated fairly recently though. They use the Events application to announce video chats, and they have an RSS feed of CareerBuilder jobs in the Chicago area.