

communiqué

tech talk by angelo fernando

Prep your story for the ‘timeless Web’

In the future, every story will need to have a beginning, a middle and a hyperlink

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about the author

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I often return to the theme of storytelling because so much of what we do centers on telling stories. We have been trained to think that the stories we create need to adapt to the attention economy: People are too distracted; the Web has turned audiences into content snackers, we are told. Our stories need to cut through the clutter, so we'd better shorten our preambles and jazz up our story lines. Sound familiar?

I don't dispute that there's clutter. But there's another weather condition we storytellers might be flying into. It's the unrelenting jet stream of the link economy. The link what? At the risk of simplifying the concept, let's just say that in the future, every story will need to have a beginning, a middle and a hyperlink.

Many people ignore the link economy because they believe they are only responsible for producing content. It's someone else's job to distribute it. This “content is king” thinking is not completely off the mark, but it's too vague, and implies that any content is terrific. It is why we hear such requests as, “Could you just



With augmented reality, *Esquire* enables readers to experience content in an unexpected way.

throw some ideas together for our newsletter?” or “I need a few quick sentences from your PR folks to update our Facebook fan page.” Such staccato signals of constant information don't really build an ongoing story. It's time to stop thinking of ourselves as content machines and instead think of our roles as link machines. That's what the Web's architecture was intended to be—intensely hyperlinked.

Here's an assignment: First, if you have not already done so, go author and edit a Wikipedia

entry. It's hyperlink heaven in there. Sure, the entries have to be “neutral”—dry, really—to survive. But wikis teach us that in this information-obese, context-hungry world, hyperlinks are like super-nutrients. Dave Weinberger, in his book *Everything Is Miscellaneous*, notes how a page in Wikipedia is not something that even exists. It is instead dynamically created to have the look and feel of a page, a collection of elements supplied by multiple servers at the moment it is needed—that is, a collection of hyperlinked content.

Framing a story that is dynamically pulled together by hyperlinks forces you to think about the broader universe in which your story will live. Before hyperlinks, any story could be a mash-up of fact and fiction. Today, as job seekers are well aware, any little white lie, any scurrilous claim, gets found out. A candidate's life story, her CV, has to line up with the larger, hyperlinked storyboard that lives in the cloud. Likewise, an organization's brand story is pulled up from a myriad of sources (servers), its links curated by millions of cus-

tomers, suppliers, product reviewers and more.

“Try to win the story,” advises Matt Thompson, editorial product manager at National Public Radio in the U.S. When I asked him about this new format of storytelling, he noted how news is “transitioning from an area of niche into an area of networks.” Thompson represents a handful of journalists who have been critiquing the practice of telling stories through the filters of “recency” and “immediacy.” Our stories, he says, should be obsessive about context. In his recommendation to journalists, he suggests that they “aim to produce a work of journalism so excellent it’ll get passed around for weeks,” even if it means creating the story as “a nicely packaged collection, a wiki, or something else you devise. The key is that it should be long-lasting and distinctive.” What might save journalism is good medicine for us as well. Unless we tap into network effects—in which content becomes more valuable as individuals and organizations link to it, share it, mash it up and add to it—we will be lost in the noise, and lost in the niches.

Here are two examples of how this might work.

- **Living Stories** involves two newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, working with Google. The project looks at how the news business might harness the Web,

rather than become road kill (<http://livingstories.googlelabs.com>). Living Stories highlights that eternal pull between real-time information and long-tail value of content. For example, check how the H1N1 virus has been covered and curated here: bit.ly/c6Dj5j.

- **Augmented reality** is more audacious and involves a different kind of hyperlink. Magazines such as *Esquire* have placed a code on their covers and other pages. When held up to a web cam, the code lets the reader experience content in an unexpected way. Check out how at www.esquire.com/AR.

Many of us, no matter how digital our work has become, still have old-media assignments such as PowerPoint decks, white papers and book chapters on our to-do lists. These content pieces are seldom meant for real-time consumption. They are, to put it somewhat uncharitably, frozen in time. But, as Thompson suggests, we need to understand “how the real-time Web can point to the timeless Web.” The most valuable content that gets passed around and consumed—say, on Digg, StumbleUpon or Delicious—is not the latest tweet, but something that’s deeply contextual, he says.

Esquire’s cover story does not live on a printed page and a web page. It is written in a way that can address the reader directly, in the voice of actor Robert

Downey Jr., which opens the door to the link economy. A music review lets the reader sample a cut from the album. Once that edition of the magazine becomes a back issue, the review could be turned into a living story with new voices and new conversations added for the timeless Web. I like the fact that this gimmicky, nascent, print-to-Web experience is enhanced only by the reader taking action—in this case, pointing the magazine at something. He could also tilt it to navigate through the content. When was the last time you used paper like a pointing device?

What might be your strategy for creating context that’s deeply contextual? The next time you “throw some ideas together,” find ways to enhance and update them as if they were a wiki. Think of every story as an opportunity to be woven into a larger, ever-developing story line. And then, make sure you own and nurture each URL that’s home to your content.

We can be sure that new opportunities will show up as mobile devices and e-book readers become the new on-ramps to your real-time and timeless content. Only if we experiment with the inputs, tweak our links and stretch the “skins” of our stories will we become better storytellers for the digital age. •

living stories brings news to life

The New York Times and *The Washington Post* are working with Google on a project called Living Stories, to “experiment with a different format for presenting news coverage online.” The official Google blog describes the concept behind the project: “News organizations produce a wealth of information that we all value; access to this information should be as great as the online medium allows. A typical newspaper article leads with the most important and interesting news, and follows with additional information of decreasing importance. Information from prior coverage is often repeated with each new online article, and the same article is presented to everyone regardless of whether they already read it. Living Stories try a different approach that plays to certain unique advantages of online publishing. They unify coverage on a single, dynamic page with a consistent URL. They organize information by developments in the story. They call your attention to changes in the story since you last viewed it so you can easily find the new material.”

<http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2009/12/exploring-new-more-dynamic-way-of.html>