



# NewsLab Report

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## Planning for Crisis Coverage

September 11 was a wake-up call for many television newsrooms, as managers realized they were unprepared to deal with a huge breaking story. There's been little time since then to plan for the next time, but it's essential to get started now. "You may think you're ready," says Bob Brooks of CONUS, who was at KFOR-TV in Oklahoma City in 1995 when the federal building was bombed. "I guarantee you, you're not."

Step one is to create or update a comprehensive disaster plan and a companion resource guide. Involve all departments, especially engineering and facilities, in the planning. The best coverage in the world does your viewers no good if they can't see your signal. Prepare for all contingencies, including the loss of your main transmitter, inaccessible feed points, and a power blackout.

The plan should cover whom to notify, how to reach them, and what their assignments will be. Note how you will get cash, rent extra equipment, put people up in hotels or at the station, and feed the staff. Consider assigning some of these tasks to the business or sales departments. They will want to help and you will need all the help you can get.

The resource guide should spell out the plan, along with up-to-date contact information for the entire staff. Make clear their formal responsibilities and include other useful notes, like who has a four-wheel drive vehicle or a home video camera and where they live. The guide should also list emergency contacts for your city and sur-

rounding counties and include current maps. Put it in a computer file anyone can access, but make sure you have printed copies, too, both on and off site, in case of disaster.

Step two is to review your routines. Where do you refuel your news vehicles? If you use only one gas station where you have an account, you could be in trouble. When are batteries put on charge? Make it a station-wide habit to check

gear at the end of each day. Do you require photographers to leave their gear at the station? "Change your policy," says Brooks. His station got the first ground-level video of the Oklahoma City bombing from a photographer who was nearby, and off the clock.

Make sure you're ready to put home video and phone calls on the air. Both were a staple of the early coverage of the World Trade Center at-

tacks. "We commandeered the public affairs department and turned them into the field as radio reporters," says former WWOR-TV news director Will Wright.

Don't forget your Web site. Many sites were so overloaded the day of the terrorist attacks that no one could get in, and when they did, they found only wire updates. Create a low-graphics version of your home page now, and make sure several people know how to post fresh, local information.

Planning for the next disaster may seem like a waste of time, especially if you think it won't happen to you. But that's what everyone thinks. Until it does.



# Video Storytelling in a Digital Age

by Julie Jones

“There is a clear and intriguing relationship between video preference and age.”

Online journalists have a multimedia toolbox full of storytelling possibilities. But since an online story can be told in any combination of words, audio, still photos, graphics and video, some journalists may consider multimedia to be code for multiple confusion. Perhaps the most confusing question of all is how to use video on the Web.

A new study of online users’ video preferences conducted at Arizona State University suggests the answer may depend on whom you’re trying to reach. Three different Web sites were created out of the feature “Crutch Freestyle,” a story by digital journalist David Snider. The pages offered different levels of video and interactivity:

- Linear—presented the video much like a television story.
  - Quasi-linear—used a text transcription of the story with a still image that linked to the video.
  - Non-linear—used several still images to link to different parts of the video story.
- The linear version required the least interactivity from the users and the non-linear required the most.

Online users from two age groups—seniors over 55 and Generation Y users between 18 and 24—navigated through all three versions to determine which one they preferred. These age groups represent some of the most active and experienced online users—both key demographics for online news sites.

Though the study used a small sample of 17 participants, some patterns did emerge. The senior women all preferred the linear version, and found the text of the quasi-linear version to be a roadblock to the video clip. Senior men, however, preferred the quasi-linear version by a wide margin, and said the text helped their understanding of the story. One senior man put it this way:

“It is like reading a novel about something and then seeing the movie about it.”

The Gen Y users were less predictable, but they narrowly preferred the non-linear version, apparently because it put them in charge of the story. As one Gen Y woman said, “I didn’t have to follow [the story] the way that they had originally laid it out. I did it the way I wanted to see it.”

If you consider which approach each age group *disliked*, there is a clear and intriguing relationship between video preference and age. None of the Gen Y participants preferred the linear version and none of the seniors preferred the non-linear version. In other words, the version one group liked the *least* was liked the *best* by the other group, and vice versa.

The two age groups also navigated the stories quite differently. Even when exploring the non-linear version, the seniors used linear logic—starting with the top right clip and then moving down the page. Gen Y users, however, navigated through the non-linear story in a number of different, non-predictable ways.

For journalists, this study supports an old mantra: Know your audience. Stories expected to appeal to older men might best utilize a text and video combination. In contrast, stories that should appeal to older women could feature video more predominately. If your online material attracts a younger audience, developing non-linear stories will be increasingly important. These users, born into a digital world, look for interactive media and, at least in this study, soundly rejected old-fashioned linear media.

As long as most home users still “dial up” their Internet access, the text and video combination of the quasi-linear approach might be a common ground for general stories with wide appeal where all users can meet.

*Julie Jones is a former TV photojournalist. This research was part of her master’s project at ASU.*

**References**

- View the research project online at <http://www.public.asu.edu/~jonesz/FSC/Video%20linearities%20project.htm>
- Contact researcher Julie Jones at [jonesz59@hotmail.com](mailto:jonesz59@hotmail.com)

### Fresh Ideas for a New Newscast

by Scott Picken, News Director, KBCI-TV, Boise, Idaho

Times are tough. That's never been truer for television newsrooms. For KBCI-TV 2, that reality carried added weight last year, because in this tough economic environment, we added a new newscast.

A year ago, we were doing a 5:30 pm newscast, a 10 pm newscast and a morning show. "Idaho 2 News" at 6:30 pm would become a reality in the fall of 2001. Corporate would support me with some additional resources, but economic realities would not allow them to supply me with what I thought I would need to put another truly compelling news product on the air.

I needed ideas. Some different ways of thinking. I had used some of NewsLab's materials on storytelling before, and after reading about how NewsLab had helped a large-market station with similar issues, I approached Deborah Potter with my dilemma. We exchanged detailed e-mails outlining my goals, concerns, and operational issues. What I got back helped me to mold "Idaho 2 News" at 6:30 into a very successful news program.

How did Deborah help? For one, she convinced me to think about these newscasts differently. Forget my



Video frame from "Pop Up Idaho," KBCI-TV

ideas about a newscast of record. Think about who is watching each program and what they really want. She also persuaded me to stop putting all my effort into the top of the show. Think of each newscast as having a beginning, middle, and an end. The result had an impact not only of my 6:30pm newscast, but my 5:30pm newscast was reworked as well. Both are better products for their respective audiences. In fact, we really have no local newscast of record now.

There was a barrage of good ideas for content. One Deborah suggested came off the NewsLab Web site. We're now using "pop-ups" to help tell stories. These are feature stories for the time being, but I eventually want to expand it to more substantive stories.

The NewsLab Web page was and remains an excellent resource for news, ideas, and concepts. I plan on making 2002 the year we fully develop a disaster plan, and have already consulted the NewsLab Web page.

Now that "Idaho 2 News" at 6:30 is a reality, and is drawing rave reviews from viewers, my hope is that NewsLab will continue to offer more input. They've already had a substantial impact on what we do.

### Trade Tips

Graphic video can make viewers more interested in a story, while at the same time making it harder for them to remember the facts. Researchers at Syracuse University produced three versions of a story about a fatal accident involving a truck and a pedestrian. The least graphic version showed a long shot of the victim covered by a sheet. A more graphic version showed the victim in a medium shot, uncovered. In the most graphic version, the victim is seen close up, with what appear to be tire tracks across the chest and face.

The study found that viewers were significantly more interested in the story that used the extremely graphic video. Viewers also found that version more newsworthy, and said they felt greater sympathy for the victim. But viewers remembered the facts in the story better after watching the least graphic version, and they also told researchers that they actually found the most graphic version too gruesome to watch. The bottom line seems to be that while negative video can engage viewers at an emotional level, graphic images not only get in the way of factual information, they also run the risk of alienating the audience.



image © 1998 PhotoDisc, Inc.

# New Video and Book Showcase Storytelling Strategies

Watching and deconstructing the best television journalism is a great way to learn what works in a news story. But excellent examples offer few clues to what does *not* work. One way to see both what works and what needs work is to compare two versions of the same story—one more successful than the other. That’s why NewsLab developed a new videotape and book, *BEFORE & AFTER: Strategies for Better Storytelling*.

By highlighting what works in television news, *BEFORE & AFTER* can help journalists find ways of transforming stories that are confusing or boring into stories that are both understandable and memorable.

The tape showcases nine stories, each of them told in two different ways. The accompanying book describes the issues raised by the first version of each story and the changes made in the second version. The book includes all 18 scripts, making it easy to compare the “before” and “after” stories side by side. It also offers

suggested questions for discussion.

*BEFORE & AFTER* covers critical issues in television news, including context, fairness, focus and story structure. It provides examples of how simple steps and innovative approaches can improve the coverage of topics that stations report on every day.

Our goal is to inspire excellence and creativity in television news by showing what it looks like and how it can be achieved. We hope you’ll find *BEFORE & AFTER* a useful tool in leading newsroom workshops or classroom discussions. Please contact us for a free copy.



Sign up for your free copy of *BEFORE & AFTER* on the NewsLab Web site at [www.newslab.org](http://www.newslab.org)



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