

AI's 10 Laws for Interactivity



AI Tompkins / The Poynter Institute / Tompkins@poynter.org

Interactive Storytelling is not about telling MORE. It is about telling stories differently.

Here are 10 "Laws" for telling stories online in ways that your public will be able to experience a story differently than is possible through TV, newspaper or radio.

1. Make it Interactive.

It is NOT about YOU. Let the user manipulate the page, select what part of the story he/she wants to explore. Offer the story in graphics, text, videos, audio and photo soundslides. From the very earliest planning stages of your stories ask, "how can we make this interactive?" Don't wait until the reporting is done and stick the leftovers online.

News consumers want what they want how they want it and when they want it. It is true for the fast food business, it is true for the coffee business and it stands to reason that it would be true in the information delivery business too. If the user wants a completely packaged story we should offer that. If they want a short text brief, we should offer that. If they want just the video with no narration, let's give it to them. Let them decide and let them interact with the information. They choose what they want to know.

2. Make a Front Page Promise. On the web, headlines must rock. Three word headlines, playful use of words and Noun-verb-object heads work best. Your website's front page must make promises about how the reader will benefit if they click a jump link. The most important promises speak to one of five main motivators:

— money, family, health, safety and community.



(KCNC-TV raw video of a scandal involving airline de-icing certification classes)

3. Make it Raw. The more important or visual the event, the more willing the public is to tolerate lower quality video and less than perfect sound. Content is king. It isn't an excuse for low photographic standards. Raw video has the affect of allowing the viewers to experience the story on their own terms, not just "know" what happened.

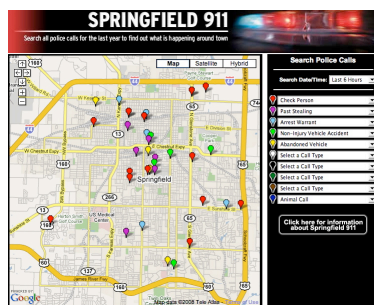
4. Leverage Your Digital Assets. When you cover trials, get copies of jury instructions, photos introduced to juries and such and put those online. Web Weather might target special interest forecasts that might not have a wide enough audience in the paper, but groups like surfers, farmers and golfers want detailed information about wind, waves, humidity and lightning. What other information do you collect in the course of your day? How can you leverage it to a higher use?

5. Involve the public and/but make it meaningful. Forget the lame online polls. How easy is it for your online users to contribute video, photos or report details of a spot news story, parades, holidays and weather? I do not recommend opening every news story up to comments. Some stories lend themselves to comments and some don't. Be prepared to monitor discussions about news stories.



(From allaboutpaintball.com)

6. Tap into Local Passion Groups. What are people in your area passionate about? In San Francisco it is the environment. In Arkansas it is hunting. In Charlotte it is NASCAR and church. Whatever people are wild about in your area, give them a virtual watering holes where people gather to talk about and share whatever they are passionate about.



(From Springfield911.com)

7. Map it! Interactive mash-up maps are a great way to allow the public to interact with information. Sites like Everyblock.com and ChicagoCrime.org map daily crime data over an interactive Google map. You can create free interactive flash maps easily using QuickMaps.com.

8. Tap Social Networks to Viral Your Work Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, MySpace all help to spread your work beyond your website. Aggregation sites like Fark, Digg, Slashdot, HuffingtonPost and Drudge can spread your story to millions of online readers instantly.

9. You must SHINE online during elections, big breaking news and special events coverage. That is when sampling will be the highest. Do not disappoint people who are sampling you for the first time. Constantly update. Make sure you are changing your lead photo and headlines. Time stamp your coverage to highlight how often you are updating.

10. Save elaborate online presentations for projects that have long legs. In the online world, your reporting does not end when you post the story. The story may morph as the public contributes photos, documents, videos, comments and ideas to the story. When a high profile crime occurs, for example, build a section of your site that will become the home of continuing coverage that could last years as the case moves through the system. For major investigative projects, include reactions, follow-ups, legislative action and resolutions that flow from the stories.