

Digital and the desire for LONG FORM JOURNALISM

The disruption of the internet, the turn to online news sources, and the global spread of mobile technology are sometimes seen as producing a new age of distraction and superficiality.¹

Without claiming that these are in fact the best of times for visual storytellers, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that contemporary developments are building on and encouraging a healthy appetite for engagement with news and information.

Here is what we found in the World Press Photo/Fotografen Federatie multimedia research project (see section 2 of the report for details and sources):

Over the last two decades – and consistent throughout that period – American data shows people enjoy reading (51% say they enjoyed it a lot), and there has been no decrease in the number reading a book on a typical day (c. 30%). Now, though, the proportion (currently 20%) reading those books via electronic devices is growing.

In Europe and the US there is a strong appetite for news, with 75% or more of people accessing news daily.

International news is a topic of interest for 44% plus in Europe and the US.

At least two-thirds of the 16-24 age groups in Europe and the US are interested in news, so the future is not as bleak as sometimes feared.

Significantly, mobile technology is helping to cultivate this appetite for news:

- accessing news is one of the top things mobile consumers do
- it increases the amount of news they consume
- it increases the number of longer stories they read
- organisations like the *Wall Street Journal* report that people spend at least as much time (40-50 mins) on their tablet app as they did with the printed paper.

Web video is the subject of current debate, with some producers questioning its value. That argument makes some good creative points that need to be examined in more detail, although there is wide variation in what counts as web video. But it is clear that news consumers like linear video. Media organisations we surveyed repeatedly said it was one of the two most popular formats for people coming

to their sites. As a result many media organisations (especially those formerly known as newspapers) are investing heavily in video production. All this makes online video the fastest growing multimedia format, with encouraging audience behaviour for those producing stories:

- News is a popular category on YouTube (it was the most searched-for item in four out of 12 months in 2011).
- There is no strict correlation between length of video and popularity. One-third of popular videos were two to five minutes in length, and nearly one fifth were longer than five minutes.
- Oyala, a large video streaming platform, reported that long form videos of more than 10 minutes accounted for 57% of viewing time on tablets they served.

Multimedia completion rates can also be good:

MediaStorm says that more than half, and often two-thirds, of those viewing their stories online stay with them to the end, even when stories run up to 20 or more minutes.

We can also point to studies commissioned by the Associated Press demonstrating that audiences desire breadth, context and depth, news consumers feel they have the headlines and what they want is the background. To that end, they value the depth that visuals (both still and moving) can bring.

This shows the audience is out there; they have an appetite for visual stories, and are consuming long form journalism and video. This does not mean the audience for visual stories can be easily found or quickly engaged. It still takes a good story, and one that is accessible to as many as possible. But both audience desire and our ability to reach them are encouraged by the digital transformations many feared would have a negative effect on the future of visual stories.

This is the seventh in a series of posts highlighting the content of "Visual Storytelling in the Age of Post-Industrial Journalism", the World Press Photo/Fotografen Federatie study of the global emergence and development of multimedia in visual storytelling, especially photojournalism. The posts are searchable with the "Multimedia Research Project" tag.



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Endnotes

1. This position draws on the likes of Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows* and crops up in articles such as "Smart readers are too distracted to read smart content." There are two problems with these claims. First is that the science on the impact of technology on thinking is contested, as the arguments reviewed here make clear. Second is that the claims are absolutist, giving a sense there is a general social-psychological condition that automatically affects all. *The New York Times* ran a good series on brains and computers in 2010 but its opening character revealed that "distraction" might be a conscious choice. While 17-year-old Vishal Singh was used as an example of one whose love of computers and the internet meant he couldn't focus on school homework, he had no trouble concentrating unreservedly on his true passion – film making – spending hours editing short sequences and getting an A in his film studies class. As such, he is hardly "wired for distraction".