Amazoning the News

What if we told stories the way Amazon sells books?

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*"It may be hard to believe at the moment,
but people once defined the meaning of their lives
by the stories they told one another."*

David Denby, writing in *The New Yorker* magazine, lamented the lack of coherent stories in contemporary, action-packed movies. I have a similar complaint about the web. The web has content, it has material that is repurposed, it has data — but where are the stories?

Where are the stories that are being told in a new way appropriate to this medium? In my opinion, the stories that are done in the best, the most web-specific way, are not on the New York Times site or Salon or Washingtonpost.com. The best job of story telling is being done by ... Amazon.

Why Amazon? To understand, first we need to look at what we mean by story. We're accustomed to the way stories are told in print and in movies. We know the form and the vocabulary. In fact the old-media story template can be boiled down pretty simply, as it is in a *New Yorker* cartoon by Roz Chast. The four elements of a story, she says, are: "Once upon a time. Suddenly. Luckily. Happily ever after." Traditional story telling is all about narrative arc and character development.

How is story telling different on the web? The web uses all the tools of print, as well as those of video and audio. But it *destroys* narrative arc, character development, continuity. On the web you lose the strengths of "Once upon a time. Suddenly. Luckily. Happily Ever After."

The web is *not* conducive to story telling as we know it. Which is a shame. Because good story telling is transforming and it conveys meaning. The web *can* offer a meaningful experience — just not in the traditional story-telling way. The web is really about people, and people come

to it with certain goals that they want to satisfy. If you help them fulfill their goals, you will create a meaningful experience.

There are 5 basic goals that users come to the web for:

1. **Share**: Think back to this past Christmas season. What was number one reason people got online? According to Pew Research, it was not to buy gifts, but to send email. They wanted that emotion of warm, human connectedness.

2. **Inform**: People have a need to know, which is why they come to news and weather sites, for example and why MSNBC.com and CNN.com are so highly rated. 96% of web users are seeking information, says Jakob Nielsen.

3. **Create**: This is the flip side of inform and this is one of the ways, obviously, the web is so different. For just one example, think about any forum, or my new favorite, Plastic.com, where users are creating content.

4. **Entertain**: The game sites certainly satisfy this goal, but so does Shockwave with its animations, so do all the goofy indie film sites, so does AdCritic.com, where you can see the best TV ads of the week.

5. **Transact**: To buy and sell. Need I say more than Amazon and eBay.

Now you may be thinking, I'm an editor, so I'm in the business of fulfilling goal #2, inform. But if you are going to create a meaningful experience, you need to consider *all* your visitors' goals. Knowing the five goals doesn't tell you how to help satisfy them, in other words how to **engage** people and connect with them on the web.

That's where the 5 Rules Of Net Engagement come into play. These are the rules for enabling the five experiences that I just talked about. These rules are based on what the web does better than other media. Just as linear narrative is a tool of the print medium, just as montage is a tool of movies, these are the tools of the web.

1. **Network** - The web is the great distributed medium. It has no boundaries and it thrives on mass. Napster succeeds not just because it offers music. Its strength is based on its network. The more people who participate, the greater the value of the network.

2. **Time and place** - In old media, in print, you're pretty much limited to one time frame, the past. A newspaper is , in fact, an artifact, a snapshot of a certain point in time. But on the web, time is fluid — and it's a powerful tool. Time is information. And information is time, web consultant Mark Teflian reminds us. On the web, time can be both timely — up to the minute — and timeless.

3. **Interactivity** - This is one of great differentiators of the web. This is what web guru Jakob Nielsen means when he says that doing is more memorable — and makes a stronger emotional impact — than seeing.

4. **Data** - No where else but the web do you have the opportunity to provide so much data; it's literally limitless. You also have a plethora of different data types — such as audio, video and Flash files. Mining data and creating relationships between them is something the Britannica site does so well.

5. **Personality** - This is something people tend to forget about on the web. As we're all try to figure out the new rules, everyone ends up looking like everyone else. But when you consider the immensity of the web, the billions of pages out there and the ubiquity of information, perhaps the only thing that's going to set you apart is creating a personality: a tone a voice that mirrors who you are. That's why successful sites have a personality, why Suck is different from Yahoo and Flowerbud.com

So now you have 5 Rules of Engagement. And you are probably using one or two of them on your site. You may even be using all 5, but perhaps not in the optimum way. And that brings me back to Amazon.

Amazon is a site that has mastered the vocabulary of the web. It engages all 5 goals — share, entertain, create, inform and transact — and it uses all the tools: network, time, interactivity, data and personality.

It has a network of readers who offer reviews, and you always know what's timely and how old information is. Users offer not just reviews but their own Top 10 lists, that is, they interact. Amazon mines its deep well of data to tell you what's selling, what's not, how items are ranked. And as for personality, you always know when you're on an Amazon page.

Which brings us to the point: What if we told stories the way Amazon sells books.

Example One - NBA Story
Take a minute to look at this page. This is a page designed by one of my colleagues Shayne Bowman. Look at what Shayne has done here: he's used all the tools that Amazon uses to sell books to tell a story in a new way.

At the top of this page is the URL — which, like Amazon's ISBN numbers, is a unique identifier for this sports event. The unique identifier is what makes Amazon so successful; it's a way of bringing together all the disparate pieces of information that hang off or contribute to our under-standing of a book. Same thing can be applied to a sports event or any news event. So while the story changes, it still has something to pivot around — and a way for readers to find their way back. Thus, the so-called 'story' becomes a product, or an object.

Also notice that this story-event works just like Amazon; what appears on the page is determined by a set of reader preferences. It assumes the reader is a Mavericks fan, but if the reader makes choices that show that he or she is a Knicks fan, different elements would appear.

Let's see how the 5 Rules and 5 Experiences play out on this page.

Personality: This page has the personality of a game: it's fast, brash, energetic. The copy is lively. There are reader comments. Headers are direct, no coy or ambiguous language. ESPN makes an appearance here, and rightly so. Their slogan for NHL promotional spots is "Every game has a story."

Time & place: Under the lead item, you're told the amount of time it will take to read the story and when the story was posted. This is a way of managing time expectations and giving a sense of how fresh the material is. Time also comes into play in the "Season At A Glance," as well as with the items about the previous games, today's game, the next game. This is time as a tool, time as navigation. And of course there's a calendar, which makes use of the offline and online network of TV shows, appearances, coach chats.

While we're talking about time, note that there is no time stamp that says "now." That's because this event-object is always changing as the story evolves, as readers get involved, as time marches on. "Now" in this sense is contextual. As for place, this page acknowledges the web's

lack of boundaries, by gathering articles from all appropriate geographic sources: The Fort Worth paper, New York newspaper web sites, ESPN.

Network: The web is made up of people, the more the better. This page does everything it can to bring people together. One is the story ranking by readers. The page also tells where this story is most popular, for example at EDS and the University of Texas. This is ranking by geography, although as we'll see there are other ways to rank.

Writing on *Editor & Publisher's* web site, Steve Outing cited a study at Penn State in which people were asked to judge the quality and credibility of a news article on a web site, based on whether the story had been selected by an editor, or whether it had been highly ranked by other readers. The story chosen by other readers rated higher, even though it was the same story as the one selected by the editor. This page tells you what other stories network members are reading. And it gives you a reward — points — for sending this article to someone else and thus expanding the network.

Interactivity: Speaking of points, look at how this page deals with interactivity. It offers rewards, or "points," particularly for interactivity. So you get points for reading the story, and more points for emailing the story to a friend or participating in a forum.

The points then become redeemable for merchandise at the Mavs store — or to purchase content that is not available for free — allowing people to **transact.** When the reader buys content, the page assumes he or she is not a member; the page is set up for micro-transactions. Using the reader preferences data, the store can be customized for Knicks fans rather than Mavs fans. And of course simply engaging in "points" gathering is **interactivity** itself.

Creating certainly is interactive. Here visitors **create** in traditional forms like the "Talk About the Game" feature. They also create at a higher level - by fashioning what the story, what the page and what the web site itself looks like — every time they choose to click a link, send a comment, make a decision.

Data: Just as Amazon mines its own data bank of books, reviews, rankings, this page seeks out every instance of useful info about the Mavs and brings it up to the reader. So you can see more articles, other sports stories that readers of this page like, and other news stories that readers like. This page takes the data that the site has and turns it into meaningful information.

In the center, the ESPN game immersion material also shows the value of different data types — real-time TV, radio. The whole page is about immersing yourself in data, taking advantage of the obsessive nature of the web. Notice, there is no story here in the traditional sense. The story is what the user makes up from the elements he or she chooses. And the story is always changing, not only as time changes it, but as users contribute to it, rate it.

Also, be aware, that nothing on this example is hypothetical. It combines applications or content now being used by Amazon, ESPN, the Mavericks site and Dallasnews.com.

Example Two - News Story
What about a story that is not so easily broken up as a game story? Chris Willis, another colleague, designed this hard-news page that hews even more closely to the Amazon model.

This example builds not around an event, per se, but a topical issue. That's because issues, like stories, are constantly evolving. This issue, the controversy over a Supreme Court nomination, is a starting point from which to hang data, reader questions and feedback. And as readers get more and more involved, the story itself changes in response to their queries.

So on this news page, the specific event story, at top, center, is only a teaser — a concise summary, with a link if you want to go to the text story. There are Opinions and a Live Vote just below — showing that these are integral parts of the story.

Time and Place: This page also gives a nod to the notion of Time and Place by posting the story with Universal Time Code, or GMT.

There is also a readers' ranking, and a story ranking — showing that it's popular with conservative males aged 35-55 in Southern California. So here you have a psychographic ranking rather than geographic ranking. Recent reader comments foster the sense of **network** and **interactivity** — similar to Plastic.com or Slashdot.

Personality: By highlighting a reader comment, high up this page shows that feedback is as important as the so-called lead story. And note the irreverence of the reader comment: The writer asks: What's so great about bi — meaning bi-partisanship and refers to Ralph Nader's 'skinny, loveless arms.' Here, users are defining the personality of the page.

Network: You find out that readers who read this story also read pieces in the *Washington Post* — using the network and geography. Again, building on the notion that what readers are interested in is what counts.

And, keeping in mind the study Steve Outing cited, you can browse related stories that were chosen:
a) By the editor
b) Or by the readers. And the readers' links appear here.

Interactivity: The so-called story-story is at the bottom. On the right hand side of the page, notice the View Cart, so you can buy not just merchandise, but more content. And there are featured sections. You can interact — save or send the story, or set up a Favorites List. Of course there's a poll — interact and enter the discussion.

Time considerations: On the right is a teaser to tonight's TV show about the issue under discussion, with a "remind me" button. And on the lower right, an up-to-the-minute tabulation of how many points you have accumulated. You're now eligible for this cool mug. You get instant gratification and an ongoing incentive to use the site.

Data: The elements under "Explore this Story" feed the user's obsession to know more about the issue. It captures the interaction of the community of readers. They ask questions, their questions then form the new links and access to deeper data. As you move around the page, you see an organic landscape of opinion that grows and changes.

And because it is organic, over time the page will grow — or degrade and die if there is no reader interest. To encourage a long life for the issue, readers can explore more such stories from the archives, or from the *Washington Post* or *New York Times*.

The feature, "Readers Also Wanted to Know," turns reader queries into a way to broaden the story. What does an attorney general do? How do you reconcile beliefs and jobs? The network tells you which data to move, to retrieve and highlight. At the bottom left, Chris offers readers an easy way to rate the stories.

As these lively examples show, on the web, storytelling isn't dead. It's alive, and well — and uniquely different.

Mix it up online
Join in the forum at: www.hypergene.net/ideas/amazon.html

About Hypergene

Hypergene's consultants have more than 40 years combined experience in storytelling in a variety of media: web sites, magazines, newspapers, books and television. Award-winning editors and designers, they specialize in creating and displaying content that has one goal: to connect with the reader.

They have edited and art directed at major daily newspapers including *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Detroit News*. As well, they have consulted for companies including Procter & Gamble, Nestlé, Honda and Harrah's. All three have launched successful magazines, and have consulted for magazine publishers including Smithsonian and Hearst.

Previously, they were a strategic development team at Belo Interactive, a subsidiary of Belo Corp, the nation's 9th largest media company. They developed product standards for Belo's web sites and electronic initiatives, which deliver 40 million page views every month.

Our Team members:

Shayne Bowman has worked as a graphic artist, designer and art director for *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Detroit News*. He received more than 50 awards from The Society of News Design (SND), including "Top 10 Best Designed Newspapers in the World." Bowman and Willis co-founded and art directed the city magazine, *Hour Detroit*. *Hour* was cited by *Folio* as the country's top regional magazine.

Ellen Kampinsky is a senior editor at *Talk* magazine. She has created some of the most-copied and successful newspaper feature sections in the U.S. while at *The Dallas Morning News*. Later, she co-founded an award-winning parenting magazine, *Dallas Family*, and produced its TV show. Kampinsky has been editor-at-large for D, the city magazine of Dallas, and developed several direct-marketing magazines.

Chris Willis has been an editorial cartoonist, illustrator, infographics editor, designer and art director. He has received more than 75 design, graphics and illustration awards from the Society of Newspaper Design including "Top 10 Best Designed Newspapers in the World." In 1995, he was awarded the prestigious SPX award from the Society of Professional Journalists. Willis, most recently, was a usability consultant for Ericsson's Mobile Internet division.