The business of culture a single subject community: lessons from <em>The Culturist</em>  

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Abstract

The Culturist.ca is the result of a term long course within the Digital Humanities Minor for undergraduate students, worked on in collaboration with the CulturePlex Lab at Western University. An experiment in independent journalism and multimedia production, this website highlights research undertaken by undergraduate students incorporating various disciplines in an attempt to make their academic work accessible to and garnering attention from a wider public outside the university.

Students in charge of creating and maintaining the project work collaboratively and produce a best practices document while learning the strategies involved in organically generating a user base for their content online.

The Culturist.ca est le résultat d'un cours d'une durée de une période au sein de la mineure en sciences humaines numériques pour les étudiants de premier cycle, sur lequel a travaillé le laboratoire CulturePlex de l'université Western. Ce site Web, qui s'avère une expérience en journalisme indépendant et en production multimédia, met en valeur les recherches entreprises par les étudiants de premier cycle, incorporant diverses disciplines afin de tenter de rendre leur travail académique accessible et attirer l'attention du grand public en-dehors de l'université.

Les étudiants chargés de la création et du maintien du projet travaillent en collaboration et produisent un document des meilleures pratiques tout en apprenant les stratégies à déployer pour produire de façon organique une base d'utilisateurs pour leur contenu en ligne.

Keywords: Single subject news model, data analytics, graph database, journalism, social media

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The product of a term long course in the Digital Humanities Minor for undergraduate students at Western University, <em>The Culturist</em> is an online single-subject journalistic platform that was created in collaboration with the CulturePlex Lab, also at Western University. This project was aimed as an experiment in independent journalism and multimedia production. As a result, the website highlights research undertaken by undergraduate students incorporating various disciplines in an attempt to make their academic work accessible to and garnering attention from a wider public outside the university. This paper details the processes implemented in order to organically create an audience for the content presented on the platform.

Content of the project: The single subject model

The newly popular trend of single subject news communities was most suited for presenting our research as well as for our teaching methodology. A single subject community is a "hypertopical" news source that deals with in-depth research on a single subject and caters to a loyal and focused readership. In this respect, the students could align their research interests towards an aspect of the economic motivations and implications of culture production and present it in a new media environment that they were already familiar with. Moreover, the cycle of production and consumption of media content inherent to a single subject model was ideal for our working methodology, as will be detailed in the following sections.

The boom in single subject communities arose from the crisis in contemporary journalism, particularly the untimely dismissal of the New York Times Executive Editor, Jill Abramson, and the internal reevaluation report that was later leaked on the internet as the New York Times Innovation Report. The report detailed the strategies of other companies – bigger and smaller than the New York Times – to constantly improve themselves and reach out to a more consistent readership. The report prompted a surge of smaller, independent media endeavours that relied on a close relationship between the different teams of the company, particularly the digital content publishers and the marketing experts. According to the report, a media giant like the New York Times could not successfully penetrate the digital media market due to a disconnect between these sections of the same publication.

From being a focus of the New York Times best practices document, single subject communities are becoming vastly studied; the Tow Centre for Digital Journalism has a research project devoted to the phenomenon, and has invited the News Deeply pioneer, Lara Setrakian, to collaborate in the project. Setrakian is best known for creating platforms such as Syria Deeply, Arctic Deeply and Ebola Deeply. Her work with the News Deeply brand and her collaborative reports with the Tow Centre have guided the development of our project.

The Single Subject model provides streamlined content for a niche audience, and has been seen to ensure consistent readership:

The potential benefits are high: single-subject websites can dramatically raise the supply of high-quality journalism, covering complex and chronic issues that are widely neglected in mainstream media. To the publisher, the niche news model represents an unprecedented opportunity to serve a hyper-focused audience, capturing the market and building a community among return users. To the beat reporter, niche news outlets can represent a return to public service journalism, fact-based and in-depth work of the highest caliber. In short, the sites provide an opportunity for focus in an age where mainstream newsrooms can seldom afford the luxury of consistently covering a niche issue. (Nolan and Setrakian 2014)

Its effective cost structure is especially appealing to startup companies and independent publishers, since there are smaller teams working closely in almost all aspects of the platform. This gives it a fairly easy long-term sustainability, essentially making it a suitable model to run our project.

Our research content deals with tracing the underlying economic motivations behind successful cultural products in industries such as music, art, film, fashion, sports, and politics. The basis of this research arose from similar studies that juxtapose culture production and the emerging global economic models during the Hispanic Baroque or Early Modern era with present day commercialization of culture (Suarez 2015). Most of these studies trace the origins of mass production and a blurring of "high" and "low" culture as far back as the 15th century. This project is meant to serve as an example of undergraduate student research into the circulation of cultural commodities today; to what extent do major producers of culture rely on business trends, and how often do businesses harness or manipulate the appeal of cultural trends? Are there distinct economic currents underlying all culture production and dissemination? Is there a consumer group present outside of the research community that may display an interest in this kind of focused investigation in economic and cultural patterns? How feasible is it to undertake such research among the undergraduate student body? To present and disseminate research into these issues, a group of graduate and undergraduate students at Western University created The Culturist. Articles such as "Much Ado about SoundCloud," "The business of serendipity in Silicon Valley," "The future of Apple," "Facebook begins hosting journalistic content," and "Never try to close a hybrid ecosystem" deal with the strengthening economic ecosystem where humanities concerns are harnessed for higher returns in global business brands, part of a larger trend towards engineering human experiences that are otherwise considered serendipitous in order to benefit global business communities. Other articles like "Bringing light to the city: The Luminato festival," "We aren't funding Africa, Africa is funding us," "TWITCH TV: Revolutionizing the gaming Industry," "Interview: Being an artist in Toronto," and "Red Bull's cultural advertising empire,"
showcase research into the increasingly indelible mark that the human consumer base leaves on big brands and how this has left them no choice but to modify their marketing strategies according to the evolving consumer ecosystem. Succinctly put, the consumers are now the honey pot that attracts big brands, not vice versa. The following sections will detail how investigative articles like these fared among an online audience.

Methodology:

Teaching methodology:

What are we doing? In teaching and learning currently, we tend to use technology to support traditional modes of teaching - improving the quality of lecture presentations using interactive whiteboards, making lecture notes readable in PowerPoint and available online, extending the library by providing access to digital resources and libraries, recreating face-to-face tutorial discussions asynchronously online—all of them good, incremental improvements in quality and flexibility, but nowhere near being transformational. (Beetham and Sharpe 2007, x-xx)

This quote by Beetham and Sharpe sums up some of the recurring issues with digital learning initiatives in higher education: instructors may not readily adopt digital methods; there are issues with student attitude and motivation in a digital oriented classroom where they tackle information studied through the internet in different ways; a change in the social aspect of learning in a digital environment in comparison to a face-to-face setting (Ozad and Kutoglu 2010). Technical changes have been accompanied by social and cultural changes that directly impact the learning and teaching methodologies today.

Vast libraries have been digitized, and there are movements to ensure that governmental and publicly funded scientific data are openly available online. Open educational resources of the highest quality can be accessed for the cost of getting online by people who will never see the inside of a university. Academic institutions have a central role to play in these developments and in the debates over personal data and copyright that increasingly shape our digital information landscape. However, less thought has been given to the knowledge that is forgotten or lost in the process of digitization: practical skills, know-how that is deeply embedded in the context of use, and other tacit knowledge associated with habits of practice (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1996). Ironically, it may be exactly this kind of knowledge that is drawn on by effective teachers, and by effective learners too, in their most transformational work. (Beetham and Sharpe 2007, 4-5)

The idea is that the content and process of learning must be compatible with the social culture of the students. Among the recently taught courses within Western's DH Minor, a pattern of teaching centered on student experience has become apparent, to the extent that it seems a prerequisite for course designs, irrespective of the broader disciplines these courses fall under. The very nature of the courses driven by student centered learning relies on the students leading the process of knowledge creation within and outside the classroom. A few examples of these courses are Digital Creativity, and the Digital Humanist – both dealing with enriching the student experience through collaborative knowledge creation in an interdisciplinary environment. Through the experience of these courses we learned that students with interdisciplinary teams work best; they each bring to the team their area of expertise, unique perspectives on problem solving, and a heightened willingness to learn from their peers.

In order to effectively utilize the group's varied skill set, the course was implemented through a competence-oriented learning model (Bransford, Brown and Cocking 2000) as well as a problem-based learning model (Boud and Feletti, 1997). "Both models focus on students' individual learning processes and are based on the constructivist assumption that practical exercise facilitates successful learning" (Hofmann 2010). It is here that the context-of-use and practical skills in conjunction with digital know-how come into play. Competence-oriented and problem-based learning environments foster students to solve specific problems or questions in smaller learning groups and to compare and contrast their findings with the findings of experts. Instructors play the role of supervising their efforts (Oser, Achtenhagen and Renold 2006), aiming at supporting students' development from novices to experts. A key facet of these models is to work together in order to develop creative and plausible solutions. During this process of problem-solving, students have to draw on existing knowledge, research further information relevant to their project and bring about new insights (Hofmann 2010).

In essence, this course proved most effective as a blended environment where the group organization entailed working largely online in smaller teams with clearly defined tasks and goals, in addition to face-to-face meetings for additional instruction and conducting milestone checks. Within the Humanities context, this multidisciplinary project could efficiently and successfully be concluded by means of problem-based strategies in a blended learning environment. The technical perspectives of the new media were adopted to set up a virtual learning environment that made it possible to simulate theoretical formulations of the global business and cultural economy and to put these strategies in practice in an interpretive format:

The utilization of the e-learning environment in a blended learning setting should help sensitize students to the discursive features of scientific practice, to boost their awareness of methodological standards and theoretical issues, to inspire critical reflection, to reveal and improve existing competencies and to support them in attaining further skills. This means that such a scenario should be easily adaptable to meet the demands that have been raised recently concerning the so-called key-competencies, such as interactive appliance of the new media, interaction in heterogeneous groups and independent acting. (Weinert 2001)

This was the basis of our course design with the "Business of culture" project, to ultimately foster a higher degree of creativity and innovation through collaboration. This project was, thus, designed to help participants gain experience as part of a functioning digital newsroom – an immersive environment that dealt with highly analytical and multidisciplinary content.

In an effort to encourage student research on the "Business of culture," a small team of members from the CulturePlex Lab was tasked with launching an online publication to showcase research into the increasingly indelible mark that the human consumer base leaves on big brands and how this has left them no choice but to modify their marketing strategies according to the evolving consumer ecosystem. Succinctly put, the consumers are now the honey pot that attracts big brands, not vice versa. The following sections will detail how investigative articles like these fared among an online audience.

The "Business of culture" course would allow participants to gain experience as part of a functioning digital newsroom in exchange for credit—an experience that would draw on fields and disciplines including journalism, media studies, cultural studies, and computer science. The course was offered to students with foundational experience in DH, the majority of whom had previously taken courses under the DH Minor. By the time the project started, a team of seven undergraduate students had been assembled to take part, coming from a variety of academic backgrounds and levels. The students' backgrounds included economics, business, management and organizational studies, media studies, computer science and visual arts.

Organization of the project:

These students were divided into three principal groups based on requirements for the construction and maintenance of The Culturist website: user engagement, social media, and content creation. Team members carried out a personalized, expertise-based function within their respective sub-section of the project, while simultaneously working collaboratively with their classmates. The freedom to participate in other groups' activities was deemed an integral part of the students' experience by the project leaders, who believed that it would make for a realistic simulation of a modern single subject newsroom and would therefore be more valuable to participants. As a result, students from each group were required to write some content, participate in social media activity, and provide feedback on user experience issues throughout the website's life cycle.

While this fluidity was a key characteristic of the project, each team was also given a set of weekly responsibilities crucial to the maintenance of the site. Those students working on user engagement were responsible for building the online platform, uploading and formatting content, as well as the general upkeep of the site. They singlehandedly designed the website on a Python Java HTML framework that was hosted by GoDaddy web services. Since the site was essentially static, the web developers were responsible for formatting and uploading the articles, as they were forwarded to them by the content creation team every week. They also worked closely with the social media and user experience team to ensure that the optimum social media practices were implemented. For example, if the social media team advised that the sections for Art and Books be combined as one, based on the user engagement and search engine optimization strategies, the same was organized by the developers.
Students involved in social media were tasked with promoting content via Facebook and Twitter, interacting with other publications and determining how to increase user interaction through social networks. They organized their internal operations in order to ensure that a goal was met with every passing week. A central goal was to reach a steadily increasing number of users each week, for which they implemented a variety of strategies. Each social media member was assigned a platform to work with: Facebook and Twitter. They worked out a schedule for generating user engagement with the articles uploaded each week, keeping in mind that all members of the project were required to interact with the posts. Through their extensive research of the strategies implemented by other media platforms, they decided that a consistent stream of social media activity was the most suitable option to generate interest in the website. The aim was to create a user base for our content and the platform as organically as possible, and to learn through this process a set of best practices that would be useful in future ventures. In order to do so, a member with an expertise of data analytics worked with the social media "insights" tool to extract information on user interaction with the creators and posts, while at the same time training the rest of the group in the basics of data analytics using SylvaDB\(^2\). (A detailed discussion of this analysis follows in the next section.) This enabled the team to gain a clearer understanding of the ways in which traffic was reaching the articles and identifying early on in the project what user behaviours proved to be advantageous to our project in terms of creating awareness of our content.

Perhaps the largest team in the group was that of the content creators. They were in charge of developing stories, reaching out to industry experts and academics for the Guest Writer series, writing and editing articles that were submitted by the entire team, as well as creating visualizations and infographics to accompany the written pieces. A common practice among all these teams was to spend the first week creating a pipeline specific to their area, which detailed the cycle of content production, namely the duties of each member, when they needed to submit drafts, the editing timeline, and general planning of the pieces to be published. As with the other teams, this too was a highly collaborative process; the content creation team often worked with other members of the project with developing ideas and the writing process; members who specialized in visual design worked regularly with writers to create customized visualizations to accompany their articles, in addition to their independent pieces. Once the project took off in earnest, input from the social media team, in terms of what articles received the most attention, was incorporated into the decision making process for the later articles and ideas.

A few members of the project who were not enrolled in the course were in turn in charge of ensuring the smooth operation of the project. These team members were part of the CulturePlex Lab whose duties included the following: overseeing the teams’ work, editing student content and providing direction with respect to research and development of content ideas, supervising the activities of each group, consulting with students in order to ensure that the project progressed according to its defined timeline, and finally, providing assistance with data mining and analysis. In essence the entire team of The Culturist was comprised of graduate and undergraduate students who worked under the supervision of Dr. Suarez as he met with students each week to discuss the site's progress and provide feedback. His input and involvement was especially vital to gauge the students’ progress and evaluations.

### Social media impact:

As the most important part of the project's content distribution apparatus, social media was a consistent indicator of efficacy in the practice of promoting student research. With no established reader base prior to the site's launch, students were tasked with generating an audience through social networks like Facebook and Twitter. Though students expressed interest in exploring LinkedIn, Google+, and Pinterest as distributional platforms, they agreed that it would be more time-efficient to limit the scope of the social media operation to the aforementioned networks. The interactions with posts, the website, the social media platforms and the users were all organised and mapped in a graph database, where all the data was input from Facebook, Twitter and Google Analytics (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The structured schema of the data extracted from Twitter and Facebook Insights, and Google Analytics.

![Figure 1](https://www.digitalstudies.org/articles/10.16995/dscn.272/print/)

Figure 2: Detailed interactions between posts on Facebook and Twitter, their direct role in generating traffic to the website, and significant user response to specific posts.
Much of the site's traffic originated from the project's Facebook page, which served as the central point from which content was distributed. By the project's end, students had generated around 450 "likes," with over half of readers' sessions driven by the page. Where Google Analytics provided us with information regarding reader activity on the site—providing data indicating how long readers spent on a given article, as well as the frequency with which they clicked on other articles—Facebook provided insight into the demographics that engaged with the platform via its "Insights" feature. We were also able to evaluate the content that students were producing, based on user likes and comments on Facebook posts. These metrics confirmed for the project's leaders that students were producing interesting work, with broad appeal. As a result, Facebook became an important part of the team's consumer analysis, informing the ways in which content was produced and promoted.

After a short period of experimentation, the team agreed upon a standard format for social media posts. Each piece of content that students produced was accompanied by two descriptive Facebook posts and two shorter tweets, which were then used to promote their piece by the social media team members. All posts linked directly to the article that they promoted, and those shared on Facebook were accompanied by relevant images in order to improve their aesthetic quality. The posts shared through Twitter were accompanied by a shortened link to the relevant article since that was observed to be the norm in the twitter activity of platforms such as The Atlantic, Huffington Post, various branches of the New York Times (Health, Theatre, Music, etc.). In addition, students were required to interact with posts through "liking," sharing, or commenting — this, in order to increase the post's visibility within their own social networks (i.e. amongst their own friends, peers, and colleagues). For example, the #TeamTuesday strategy appeared to be successful, as can be seen from Figure 3, where the nodes are particularly well connected. This trending topic was used with the purpose of humanizing the website by way of generating additional interest outside of the investigative articles that were published according to our pipeline, as well as showcasing sufficient activity so as to drive internet traffic towards our content and remain relevant in the timeline of these social media platforms.

Figure 3: Alternative graph layout displaying multiple media platforms associated with The Culturist – the website, the Twitter page, the Facebook page – as well as individual posts with large number of edges or connections related to these platforms.
Despite amassing approximately 400 followers, the site's Twitter page proved less effective in generating traffic than Facebook. A possible explanation is that the lack of views from this source is due to the smaller population of followers as well as fewer posts that linked specifically to an article. Unlike the homogeneity of the Facebook page's posts, the project's Twitter feed contained 'retweeted' posts, as well as interactions with followers, which likely contributed to its lack of impact.

**Final results and conclusions:**

As its life cycle drew to a close, the team was able to draw certain conclusions regarding the site’s impact, as well as the efficacy of the single subject news model. As one of the final tasks upon which they were evaluated, students were tasked with compiling a report on the site. This was considered an important part of the project’s culmination, as it provided supervisors with a set of observations based on the actual experience of staff members, separate from its theoretical foundations.

In order to pursue a larger audience, students recommended the expansion of social media operations to include LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Google+. The combination of these networks with the pre-existent Facebook and Twitter feeds—which they believed to be a crucial part of the project's success—would allow for increased visibility and the potential to connect with users via a variety of different media. This expansion would have the added benefit of aiding in the Search Engine Optimization process, which proved time-consuming and difficult over the course of the project. However, the entire group was in consensus that the SEO process was indispensable in order to organically create an audience for the website content, in addition to the social media activity.

*Figure 4: Pagerank and Betweenness centrality of the ecosystem of The Culturist*
The students' use of SylvaDB to run analytics on this data further determined the status of The Culturist as a media platform with potential, reinforcing what we were doing right, and drawing attention to areas that needed modification:

The betweenness centrality is indicative of the integration of a network around its leading node. For the success of a technology-driven company, it is vital to have a leading network. The Culturist has proven to be the dominant link between all vertices. The primary content creator, "www.theculturist.com" allows for content to be posted regularly. This site has a strong influence on all activity within The Culturist's network. Social media is the medium used to create and reach an audience by directing readers along this path. Without the content creator (The Culturist), there cannot be any links to social media posts, social media accounts, or readers. The Culturist controls the flow of information because whenever an article is published, there are subsequent social media posts that are created in order to reach readers. (Savage et al. 2015, 8)

It also became apparent that, in order to compete with professional publications, the project would need to explore monetization strategies if it were to be resurrected in the future. Though students were able to generate significant interest in The Culturist through word-of-mouth and social networking, the obstacles facing modern digital journalists—especially those working with smaller teams, as is the case for most single subject communities—are too large to overcome with no budget. Facebook, for example, is a much more useful tool for generating an audience when administrators can take advantage of the "promote your post" function. Likewise, overly technical tasks like SEO become much more time-efficient and stress-free when a project can outsource them to experienced professionals.

Though it was undoubtedly a beneficial exercise for those programmers who enrolled in the course, using a student-developed site with no real backend became problematic when it came to formatting and uploading articles. This bottleneck could have been avoided by using a platform like WordPress to host content. With respect to the site's actual content, user feedback was generally positive. This deliberate effort in analyzing the project's performance and the members' role in it resulted in the creation of a niche readership and enabled the students to explore a new medium for disseminating research, while simultaneously gaining valuable work experience in an academic environment that better equips them for their area of specialization.

To summarize, the point of departure for this course that ensured its successful completion was the highly collaborative working dynamic among the students, the very real outcomes—in terms of timely publication of content and the audience reactions to it—and perhaps most importantly, the high stakes sense of accountability towards each member of the team as well as to the larger audience when it came to producing quality content, and understanding and implementing the mechanisms of an online publication in a niche New Media environment. In this respect, the closely-knit single subject working methodology proved effective in researching new media market forces, as well as in navigating the nuances of such a working dynamic successfully.

Notes

[1] The project ran from January 2015 to April 2015, the website continued to be live until December 2015.

[2] SylvaDB.com is a user-friendly graph database management system developed at the CulturePlex Lab that enables researchers to organize data according to flexible schemas, running query-based analytics and predictive analytics that can be visualized in graphs.

Works cited / Liste de références


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