The Life Cycle of a News Story

By Roger Black

Here’s the lede: The Internet, including user-generated content, is beating the traditional news media at its own game, according to the Society for News Design.

Well, that may be overstating it, but I got your attention. Truth is, taking a wide-angled view of the media today, it’s not too much of a stretch. What this issue of Design Journal set out to do is take one big story and look at it through the lens of different news media. The story we chose is gay marriage in California.

This was a big news story, and a major theme of the past three years, ever since Massachusetts allowed same-sex marriage in 2005. Seems like it was longer ago than that. And in fact the traditional media rolled its eyes a bit, and as related in this section of Design, dodged the story pretty well.

After all, it wasn’t the first time. Massachusetts did it first, and then San Francisco had a good whack at it, before being shut down by the court. A great deal of social conservative handwringing ensued, and state constitutional amendments against gay marriage were passed in many states where they didn’t have them already. Some 26 states now have amendments against same-sex matrimony; 43 states have laws against it.

What’s wrong with the mainstream media? No drama and few real people

By Roger Black

In the paper: big stories rule
By Dan Zedek
PAGE 24

The story’s Web path
By Ryan Sholin
PAGE 28

A graphic breakdown
By XPLANE CENTERFOLD PULLOUT
Yet this time around the hue and cry was muffled. The candidates were benignly in favor of civil unions, and for leaving the marriage issue up to the states. (Why don’t they just make marriage entirely a religious matter, and let civil unions define all the civil rights, as well as obligations like taxes? But I digress.)

Could it be that no one was able to show that gay marriage had any negative impact on straight marriage? “Nothin’ new here, right?” writes Don Wallace about the TV coverage. “Or, geez, this is the Midwest. California’s pretty far away.”

One would think that, with all the warning, the news media could have come up with more. Usually, as with turkey features on Thanksgiving, the media can be counted on to cover something big that has been scheduled far in advance. American journalists may not approve of checkbook journalism, but they put a lot of stock in calendar journalism. Yet, despite Dan Zedek’s contention that “when a story is really big, nobody captures the moment like a newspaper,” most dailies (outside of California) treated the story like a week-old school-board dispute.

Radio, on the other hand, had some fun with it. It’s ironic that KRLA in Glendale (which took the call letters of the original Pasadena home of Shadoe Stevens, the program director who helped invent alternative FM in the ’70s) broadcasts the Dennis Prager Show. As Michael Puente describes it, the shock jock “argued with callers that same-sex unions undermined the will of California voters and the tenets of Western civilization.”

The problem with most of the coverage is that it did read and sound and look like calendar journalism, and made you
think that even then the assignment editors must be using a Filofax, not a Blackberry. Dry and predictable. It was largely a duty dance, a list of issues, interviews with legal talking heads, “actualities” from city hall. No drama. And few real people.

There were exceptions among the newspapers, particularly the San Francisco Chronicle. (Some would say if it couldn’t win this one, it ought to just go ahead and merge with the Contra Costa Times.) The Chron did that wonderful piece about those two delightful old ladies, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who have been on the same-sex rights front lines since the start of the Mattachine Society. This is history in the making.

The poignancy of their story, a wonderful 50-year saga of love and sexual politics, gets through to people. But it was not the papers or the TV news shows or even talk radio that scored the most real narratives here.

It was the Internet.
The New York Times Web site trumped the traditional media with a simple slide show (June 15) by Fred Conrad, who has been taking great pictures for the paper at least since I worked there 20 years ago, and audio captions by the subjects in the pictures.

This is not the story of how gay marriage destroyed straight marriage. We’re still waiting for that one. It is the story of how the ability to get married has affected several real gays and lesbians in Massachusetts. Connubial bliss . . . and some doubt.

One man, Clint Wolbert, 28, (who would have been described in the old days as a confirmed bachelor), has declined the state’s same-sex opportunity, saying “If we do start rushing to marry, some of that different culture that we have, some of that spark that gay people tend to have, is going to start falling away.”

Well, these stories got people’s attention. Nine hundred comments were posted in a matter of days. And the com-
ments themselves get through to you. “It’s an interesting feeling finally being equal under the law,” writes Ray Russ of Palo Alto.

This narrative brush with reality filled the blogs as well. One stand-out is Susie Bright, the famous sex-and-gender writer from Santa Cruz. She’s another non-believer, scraping for reasons for lesbians to marry. “I also envied the way that weddings make your long-lost friends come out of the woodwork.” The result of her blogging: You understand the story of a real woman, at a real point in time.

Tectonic change comes to the world and we change the channel. Global warming, the collapse of the credit system, war in Iraq, a gnawing immigration crisis, the insoluble drug war, an African-American candidate for President, gay marriage in California: What’s interesting about all that?

We’re feeling in the United States that nothing matters that much, nothing affects us that much, nothing much we can do about it in any case. The free-fall, end-game collapse of the media business is just one more cataclysmic change that people who aren’t directly affected don’t care about.

The conventional media didn’t cover the subject in this exercise any better than they are covering their own meltdown, and the reason is that it’s all j-school topic journalism. Little story-telling. Few real people. And not much in the way of connection.

The reason the kids are happy to spend time texting and to lose whole days on Facebook is that they are communicating with real people and building their own narratives. It’s not that they have a short attention span—we all do. It’s that the conventional press is . . . boring!

If we can try the kind of narratives in that Pam Belluck-Fred Conrad slide show at NYTimes.com, then people might start looking at papers (or TV news) again. We don’t have much time to try.

Tomorrow: Five heartbreaking break-ups: Gay divorce

More about Roger at rogerblack.com.