

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
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DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM

IN THE LAND OF FIRE AN ICE: MULTIMEDIA IN LONG-FORM TRAVEL
JOURNALISM

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ABSTRACT

In 2013, major news outlets incorporated multimedia into their online reporting like never seen before. Stunning high-resolution images, vivid sound and professionally produced video became commonplace on news sites that were originally known just for the written word. While the use of multimedia has proven lucrative for these news organizations, especially the New York Times, travel journalists and travel magazines have fallen behind. This thesis examines the reasons why the travel journalism industry is reluctant to pursue multimedia and speculates this industry's future in the area.

This research functions as a cover essay for a project combining newfound multimedia journalism methods with traditional long-form travel narrative writing in a way that has yet to be produced by the travel journalists. "In the Land of Fire and Ice" is a narrative about the author's visit to Iceland to repair her faulty relationship with her father, and the written piece incorporates original video, audio, photography and custom maps. Readers can access this piece by visiting the following link: www.noellemateer.com.

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Dr. Russell Frank was also a tremendous help, and has been patient with me through every hiccup in the writing-and-researching process. We kicked off this process one year before this thesis's publication—I was in France and he was in California. We Skyped.

I'd also like to thank professors Will Yurman and Pamela Monk for their help. Will's course in photojournalism also inspired me to pursue multimedia studies further, and working with him on a multimedia submission for the Hearst awards was a fabulous hands-on learning experience. Pamela met with me to discuss travel journalism early-on in this process, and her own successes in travel and magazine writing have made me hopeful about my own future career.

Outside of the academic world, I'd like to thank Brad Foster, who put me in touch with Einar Lovdahl, an incredibly accommodating student musician who made for a wonderful interview in Reykjavik. That said, I'd like to thank my interviewees themselves—both Einar and Guðjón Ingi Sigurðarson—who enriched my story greatly.

Finally, I'd like to thank my mother for driving me to and from Dulles International Airport, my father for buying me plane tickets and my little brother for being my favorite person on the planet.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Think “travel journalism” and glossy magazines may come to mind. Condé Nast Traveler, Travel + Leisure, Afar—all of these sit by Kit Kat bars and packs of chewing gum at grocery-store checkouts nationwide. Think a little harder and you may think of a newspaper’s travel page. The New York Times, for instance, runs a travel section once per week.

But as behemoth as these publications are, you won’t find their important contributions to the travel journalism community on their printed pages. The real changes, which are the subject of this paper, can only be found online.

Over the past few years, the prevalence of multimedia in journalism has skyrocketed. The New York Times in particular has been leading innovation in multimedia and web reporting, and these changes are visible on its website’s travel section.

Still, the websites of major travel publications have been rather slow in the uptake of this trend. Despite rapid advances in multimedia reporting in the past few years, and widespread acknowledgement within the journalism community that multimedia reporting is the way of the future, the extent of most travel sites’ multimedia usage is a photo slideshow or two.

This paper serves two purposes: first, to detail these recent changes in multimedia reporting in order to analyze their slow uptake by the travel journalism industry, and second, to provide context for the multimedia portion of this thesis—a work of long-form multimedia travel journalism (a concept heretofore not undertaken in the travel journalism world) accessible at www.noellemateer.com.

Chapter 2

Travel journalism's place in the multimedia reporting world

Travel journalism has always held an awkward place in the reporting world. It's not foreign correspondence, but then again, it's not *not* foreign correspondence. It's total fluff, so many say, and yet again, it's responsible for shaping readers' perceptions of a foreign country. So what is it? Is it serious reporting, or just a waste of our time?

According to Folker Hanusch, "Travel journalists have a very important role to play as mediators of foreign cultures."¹ All the same, travel journalism is widely regarded as fluff, the sort of reporting that is nice for entertaining the readers, but not much else. Says Folker Hanusch, "The general view is that anyone can go on holidays, and anyone can write about them"². Furthering this point of view, travel editor Thomas Swick says, "of the special-section editors at a newspaper [...] only travel occupied a position that is viewed as requiring no particular expertise."³ These attitudes on the part of editors and journalists alike are inconsistent with travel journalism's real aims, and perhaps these attitudes can shed light on where travel journalism is now.

¹ Hanusch, Folker. "The Dimensions Of Travel Journalism." *Journalism Studies* 11.1 (2010): 68-82. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

² Hanusch, p. 70.

³ Swick, Thomas "On the Road Without a Pulitzer", *The American Scholar* 66(3) (1997), pp. 423-9.

And where is it now? Well, behind. At least from a multimedia standpoint, innovations in multimedia reporting have taken longer to reach travel stories, and many have yet to be adopted at all.

But first, it's important to note that multimedia reporting is more than a trend. Rather, journalists widely acknowledge that it is the future of journalism as a whole. Says Brian Storm, the founder of Media-Storm, a media outlet whose aim is to produce groundbreaking multimedia journalism content: "The journalism industry is not in despair, it's simply going through a redefinition."⁴ Meanwhile, Jeralyn Gerba, co-founder and editorial director of travel news site Fathom admits, "We are writers first and foremost, so we've been a little slower on the uptake of video, but we know it is an important tool for telling stories." She adds that Fathom will be "incorporating video more and more," but for now mostly links to other sites for video content.⁵ Says Mike Richard, founding editor of Vagabondish.com, "To be honest, we don't routinely publish original multimedia content," also adding that his site does share some links to videos via social media.⁶

Still, according to Nick Van Sicklen, vice president of digital sales at Time, Inc.: "Larger and more high-impact placements garner higher demand and in turn, higher rates. Video and

⁴ Ludtke, Melissa. "Long-Form Multimedia Journalism: Quality Is The Key Ingredient." *Nieman Reports* 63.1 (2009): 20-24. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

⁵ Gerba, Jeralyn. "Re: Journalism student researching travel websites- quick question?." Message to the author. 27 Mar. 2014. Web.

⁶ Richard, Mike. "Re: Vagabondish.com - General Inquiry." Message to the author. 24 Mar. 2014. Web.

custom content tend to receive the highest value.”⁷ Why, then, are they behind when travel stories offer not only rich potential for stunning imagery, but also advertising revenue?

There are, of course, a few notable exceptions. Travel guidebook producer Rough Guides revealed a stunning set of articles, “[The Rough Guide to 2014](#),”⁸ at the beginning of the year that managed to incorporate wide-screen GIFs, photo slideshows and original video. This set of articles shows travel journalism’s rich multimedia potential, a potential I tried to demonstrate myself in my own work of multimedia travel reporting, “[In the Land of Fire and Ice](#).”

⁷ Van Sicklen, Nick. "Re: Travel + Leisure Digital Ads." Message to the author. 24 Mar. 2014. Web.

⁸ *The Rough Guide to 2014*. Rough Guides, 1 Jan. 2014. Web. 10 Feb. 2014.

Chapter 3

In the Land of Fire and Ice: An example of long-form travel journalism's multimedia potential

According to Mark Deuze, a professor of media studies at the University of Amsterdam, multimedia journalism can be defined as “the presentation of a news story package on a website using two or more media formats, such as (but not limited to) spoken and written word, music, moving and still images, graphic animations, including interactive and hypertextual elements.”⁹ Thus, it's important to note that “multimedia” does not exclude traditional methods of journalism such as writing and still photos. What makes a piece of journalism “multimedia” is its blending of these different types. However, for the purposes of this paper, the term “multimedia journalism” will go beyond the standard text-and-a-photo-format to include more innovative work instead.

But first, writing—in their print editions, major travel publications have a longstanding tradition of first-person feature stories. This genre is particularly well-suited to travel journalism, as it enables the reader, who is often a tourist or aspiring tourist, to understand the tourist experience in the article's destination. As both a producer and consumer, I'm on board with this format. I began my travel piece as a long-form first-person feature, and only after writing it did I incorporate multimedia elements within it. As such, old-fashioned journalistic tradition managed to seep its way into my more modern piece.

⁹ Deuze, Mark. “What is Multimedia Journalism?” *Journalism Studies* 5 (2004): 139-152.

“In the Land of Fire and Ice” chronicles my week in Reykjavik, Iceland in January 2014. In the piece, I write about my encounters with Icelandic culture, nature, cuisine and entertainment—subjects that interest typical consumers of travel media. I also weave in a second narrative thread concerning my relationship with my father, with whom I traveled to Iceland exactly one year after he left my mother for another woman.

This combination of service-related topics (information on subjects of interest to travelers) as well as personal narrative is common among travel magazine feature stories. In the March 2014 issue of *Condé Nast Traveler*, for example, two full-length feature stories have secondary narratives focused on the author’s emotional journey. The sub-heading for a first-person narrative by Stephen Orr on West Texas reads: “Far from the glitter of Dallas and the bohemia of Austin lies the lonely, lovely landscape of West Texas: a piece of hidden America that’s made for getting lost in...and for finding yourself.”¹⁰ In the same issue, the sub-heading for Cheryl Strayed’s feature on Laos reads: “Cheryl Strayed undertook an epic journey of self-discovery when she hiked the Pacific Crest Trail alone. Here she writes about a recent family trip to Laos that reawakened her to the true delights of travel.”¹¹ Both of these articles include practical information for travelers interested in the destination at hand, and yet, they read as personal narratives.

Thus, my own personal narrative, which drives my piece on Iceland, remains traditional. And yet, it can be traditional and innovative at the same time—the innovative nature of my work lies within its multimedia sections. This is not unlike several New York Times multimedia

¹⁰ Orr, Stephen. "Big-Sky West Texas: A Road Trip Through Hidden America." *Condé Nast Traveler*. Condé Nast, Mar. 2014. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

¹¹ Strayed, Cheryl. "Sweet Surrender." *Condé Nast Traveler*. Condé Nast, Mar. 2014. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

pieces—for example, “Snow Fall,”¹² “The Russia Left Behind”¹³ and “A Game of Shark and Minnow”¹⁴ to name a few—that are also driven by somewhat traditional feature writing.

I followed the example of these pieces by punctuating my written article with various multimedia devices, albeit with a travel journalist’s spin: high-resolution GIFs, custom maps, video, embedded music playlists and original audio and photography. The following is an explanation of the significance of each element, as well as its development within the travel journalism industry.

GIFs: GIFs are short video clips that play on an infinite loop. The New York Times first debuted a high-resolution GIF with the publication of “Snow Fall”¹⁵ in 2012. Since then, GIFs have played a prominent role in their multimedia reporting. They recently made their way into the website’s travel section via “52 Places to Go in 2014.”¹⁶ The Times posts a list of recommended travel destinations each year, and previous years had featured a duller click-

¹² Branch, John. “Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek,” *The New York Times*, 20 December 2012.

¹³ Barry, Ellen. “The Russia Left Behind.” *The New York Times*. Ed. Mike Bostock, Shan Carter, and Leslye Davis. N.p., 2013. Web. 7 Feb. 2014.

¹⁴ Himmelman, Jeff. “A Game of Shark and Minnow.” *The New York Times*. Ed. Mike Bostock, Clinton Cargill, Shan Carter, Nancy Donaldson, and Tom Giratikanon. N.p., 2013. Web. 10 Feb. 2014.

¹⁵ Branch, John. “Snow Fall.”

¹⁶ Khan, Sarah, Justin Bergman, Bonnie Tsui, Tim Neville, and Danielle Pergament. “52 Places to Go in 2014.” *The New York Times*. N.p., 19 Jan. 2014. Web. 2013.

through photo slideshow with captions. “52 Places to Go in 2014,” on the other hand, features high-resolution, wide-screen GIFs instead of photos above just about every other destination.

Original GIFs are beautiful, dynamic and relatively easy to create, so they should be one of the first new elements of multimedia reporting to make their way to other sites. Still, they’re visible in very few publications. Major travel glossies Travel + Leisure, Condé Nast Traveler and Afar do not have GIFs on their websites. The only major adopter of GIFs is Rough Guides, a travel guide company based in the U.K., which published its “Rough Guide to 2014”¹⁷ in a stunning GIF-based format.

Custom maps: Perhaps unsurprisingly, custom maps are the most prominent example of multimedia development in travel journalism. Google Maps have always made it easy for casual web users to search locations, but more recently, Google Maps Engine premiered more advanced ways for users to create and share custom maps.¹⁸ This is perfectly suited for travel journalism, as creators can pinpoint places within a city or, even, country that they wish to feature. They can then change the appearance of the map as a whole.

Afar Magazine has taken full advantage of this. In a [recent online guide to Paris](#)¹⁹, readers can scroll through multiple custom maps that feature different types of things, for example “Where the Locals Eat in Paris” and “Best Hotels in Paris.” By clicking on each highlighted location, readers can view the description written by the editorial staff at Afar.

¹⁷ “The Rough Guide to 2014.”

¹⁸ “Learn More.” *Google Maps Engine*. Google, 2013. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

¹⁹ Tramuta, Lindsey. “The Afar Guide to Paris.” *Afar: The Experiential Travel Guide*. N.p., 2013. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

Given how easy it is to create and embed a map, other travel magazines aren't using them much. T + L, for example, features custom maps only rarely—for example, in [an article](#)²⁰ on a recommended walk through Washington, D.C.—even though their articles are very similar to Afar's from an editorial standpoint. Condé Nast Traveler is the same way.

Original audio: Originally produced audio is the wheelhouse of radio stations, not print magazines. But the Internet makes it incredibly easy to upload sound bites.

Audio is perhaps less popular on news websites, simply because it's less dynamic than video. Still, audio can either be used to tell an entire story—as is often the case with narrated podcasts—or can enhance a print story.

Almost all audio I encountered in my research on travel magazines' web presences was embedded audio created by other sources, not original audio made specifically for the publication.

Embedded audio: Spotify, which launched in the U.S. in 2011,²¹ makes it easy to embed music playlists with a sleek, visually appealing layout.

And Condé Nast Traveler knows. The magazine has created and embedded their own playlists using Spotify for many articles, for example, "[What to Read \(and Listen to\) Before Visiting India](#)."²² The playlist is normally embedded at the bottom of a description of the sort of music relevant to the article.

²⁰ "Washington, D.C. Neighborhood Walk: H Street." *Travel + Leisure*. N.p., 2014. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

²¹ Sutter, John D. "What's this Spotify thing all about?." *CNN Tech*. CNN, 15 July 2011. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

²² Huneus, Maca. "What to Read (and Listen To) Before Visiting India." *Condé Nast Traveler*. Condé Nast, 10 Feb. 2014. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

Embedded Spotify playlists have become common on many news sites, but many other travel sites have not implemented it. For example, Afar magazine, despite being generally advanced in terms of innovative online content presentation, usually does not embed audio even in stories where music plays a key role. In "[Playing by Heart](#),"²³ a story about bluegrass music in North Carolina, readers are not linked to sound bites in any way.

Video: Video is often what first comes to mind in connection to multimedia. And both recording and uploading technology has made video increasingly easier. While travel sites find plenty of opportunities to link to videos on sites such as YouTube and Vimeo, far fewer sites have begun creating video of their own. The New York Times, once again, leads the charge in this arena.

²³ John, Emma. "Playing by Heart." *Afar: The Experiential Travel Guide*. N.p., 11 June 2012. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

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English – native language

French – near-native proficiency

Arabic – beginner reading and writing ability