

## **From the Trenches, Strategies from Industry Leaders on the New e-Economy**

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Chapter 15 - Making News Interactive with Catherine Warren

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The journalist "brings all classes, all professions together, and teaches them to act in concert..." Joseph Pulitzer had no hint of what his simple phrase foreshadowed when he wrote his 1904 essay *Planning a School of Journalism*. But his theme of the journalist as master of convergence, and a democracy centred on a single popular assembly - the media - was prophetic.

Convergence, in the strict business sense, refers to companies expanding from their traditional jurisdictions to break down the barriers between technology and communication. In 2000, people heard the word convergence repeatedly in the context of mergers, new technologies and predictions about how they would spend their leisure time. But despite a noble heritage, "convergence" had yet to find a comfortable place in the lexicon.

Until September 2000. That month saw one of Canada's biggest deals take place with the proposed alliance of three media giants. This mega-deal came in the wake of several other billion-dollar consolidation efforts by leading Canadian media and communications companies such as CanWest Global, Rogers Communications and Groupe Videotron.

These deals are significant in the value and breadth of the assets that they represent, but none are as encompassing as the BCE/Thomson/Woodbridge alliance.

Certainly those 80-point front-page headlines about billion-dollar mergers captured the imaginations of investors and industry-types. But the real drama of convergence went far beyond the executive boardrooms - to transform the newsrooms themselves.

A decade before this media-merger uproar, the small Canadian company Blue Zone was taking shape, building its business in anticipation of the convergence to come. Catherine Warren's life experiences ultimately came together at Blue Zone, the company that first cracked the code to make broadcasting interactive.

In 1999, Catherine joined Blue Zone as its Chief Operating Officer. She came on to help propel the company structure from private to public, and extend the company business model from selling Web site design services to licensing clients the software that lets them create interactive broadcasting themselves.

It took patience, the right pitch, and a faith that traditional media would learn of the value of the Internet as a tool - and not a competitor - for Blue Zone to turn the convergence promise into reality.

"We convinced clients that we could bring together the best of TV and the Web - in order to give broadcasters a gateway to new audiences, increased advertising and e-commerce transactions. We took the high-quality production value, on-air talent, and editorial integrity of news television and married it to the interactivity, depth, and community-building of the Web."

## **News as ESP**

Enter NewsBZ, the software that Blue Zone envisioned to automate interactive news delivery. NewsBZ lets the newsroom team produce interactive news in real time, and allows broadcasters to cross-publish to traditional broadcast TV, interactive televisions with set-top boxes, the Web, handheld devices, cell phones and other WAP-enabled devices. NewsBZ "plugs-in" to a broadcaster's existing technology, allowing the production studio to capitalize on content management, video archiving and other legacy systems.

The allure of NewsBZ begins behind the scenes with journalists who use their laptops with a wireless Internet connection to compile stories. However stringent the deadlines, journalists working in an age of convergence do not have to cut corners in the race to get stories on-air and online.

Journalists use customized NewsBZ software to create "Enhanced Story Packages" and publish them simultaneously to multiple platforms. With NewsBZ, they do not need to understand complicated software, they simply log on to their Blue Zone connection through the Internet to write and produce news stories. Journalists can now combine text, audio, video, graphics, public polling and charts for instant broadcast; the software is as easy to use and as familiar as e-mail.

For audiences, NewsBZ provides their trusted news channel in an interactive video format. Individuals can interact with, say, CTVNEWS.com by "personalizing" their own news line-ups, stock tickers, local weather and other news features. They can also take part in polls and e-mail stories to friends. "The new face of interactive news is video, not text, which is a breakthrough that appeals to broadcasters and audiences alike," says Catherine.

Blue Zone creates customized user interfaces for each broadcast client to project the high-quality "look and feel" of their on-air branding. For users of the Blue Zone-created CTVNEWS.com, going deeper, digging further, searching archives and exploring the news from other vantage points becomes second nature. In this way, the audience is not just receiving as much as participating in the news.

## **Career Convergence**

At first glance, the path that Catherine took to get where she is today might look circuitous. But after a closer look this route defines a career in convergence.

In the mid-1980s, Catherine Warren was hired out of graduate school by a Texas-based publisher to edit a newly-launched magazine about high-end computer graphics workstations. Animation, 3-D graphics and computer-aided design were just taking off and the monthly magazine developed a significant readership and advertising base.

Within the year, another Texas firm purchased the magazine and poured more money into operations. Catherine led the initiative for the publishing house to increase profits by producing its fourteen magazines with desktop publishing software. Soon thereafter at age 24, she was promoted to European Bureau Chief and moved to London to establish advertising, editorial and trade-show operations for three new monthlies for the Sun Microsystems, Hewlett-Packard and Unisys markets.

"I gained unbelievable business experience at a break-neck pace," says Catherine. "On the emerging technologies front, I was covering all of the important stories about the early days of new media, the business models of companies, such as Sun, that maintain their leadership and innovation today. I learned how to set up and run an international business and manage on-site and remote teams. As early as 1985, I was managing editorial and production cycles through a modem and subsequently juggling multilingual clients and reporters as well as publishing in English, French and German.

"I learned how to manage personalities from different cultural backgrounds and with loosely competitive agendas, such as advertising, editorial and IT. And I learned how to work harmoniously with this team while representing European tax, legislation and work-styles to a US parent company. Finally, I gained and have retained my tremendous Texan respect for the almighty bottom line."

By 1992, Catherine had found an opportunity to apply her feminist business values and practices to support the next generation. She returned to the Pacific Northwest and spent four years as executive director of APASE, the Association for the Promotion and Advancement of Science Education. The organization created bilingual books, periodicals, Web sites, videos, workshops and early broadband ITV projects coaching public educators to mine the potential of girls in math and science. APASE also worked with business, government and teachers to help introduce the first new science curriculum in a generation into British Columbia's elementary schools. Concurrently, she secured Microsoft as a personal client and developed the operations plans and content models for a multimedia science encyclopedia, which became part of Encarta.

Catherine spent the next couple of years as a director at the world-renowned Vancouver Aquarium, introducing its staff and visitors to the underwater world through new media, producing award-winning environmental Web sites for families, the first secured e-commerce store for a North American Aquarium and, together with colleagues, launching Orca FM, the first all-whales, all-the-time radio station. "We were asked by the CRTC what official languages we were planning to broadcast in!" says Catherine.

Since returning to Canada from London, Catherine's work raised more than \$3M in strategic funding for education. "Non-profit business management - in terms of running skinny, running lean, making the most of the least with a do-it-yourself mentality - draws on all your entrepreneurial skills. Non-profits also know how to raise money based on an idea and how to demonstrate a variety of returns-on-investment to funders. These powers of persuasion can be directly applied to today's high-tech financings."

### **For the People, By the People**

When the world watches - and listens and clicks on icons and searches through archives - broadcasters using NewsBZ will track the information that people want.

Whatever it is that people are looking for - the scoop on who wore what at the Junos, an international trade protest or the latest in Alzheimer's research - it's this interactive audience that will ultimately dictate the course of a newsroom's reports.

Call it power to the people. In her graduate program at Columbia, Catherine studied the ideas of the school's founder Joseph Pulitzer. "The newspaper will try to develop character, but even that will be only a means to the one supreme end - the public good,"

he wrote. "We are facing that hitherto-unheard-of portent - an innumerable, world-wide, educated and self-conscious democracy."

If Pulitzer sounds idealistic, his message rings true a century later. But the basic tenets of journalistic integrity can get watered down in the real world.

"When I went to journalism school, the party line for news was, 'keep it local, dumb it down,'" says Catherine. She was a sceptical student. "Now we are going to find out how true that credo really is. My gut says people are a lot more savvy than the media give them credit for."

As journalists begin to work with new ways of getting their stories to the public it is crucial to maintain the timeliness and integrity of the news. Good new technologies won't force editors and reporters to become techies. Good new technologies will support news experts in doing what they do best: getting thoughtful relevant stories on-air and online - and to as many people as possible, as fast as possible.

"The things that I really value about journalism are not going to change," says Catherine. "Rather, the convergence of broadcast, print and the Internet will raise the stakes in terms of responsibility and credibility of media, politicians, and the otherwise powerful."

For the audience, the advantage of interactive broadcasting is that the more they explore the news, the more thorough their preferred coverage will become. They determine how they watch and what they watch; they'll get more opportunities to communicate their preferences - or their gripes - to news broadcasters 24 hours a day.

"We let broadcasters reach anyone, anytime, anywhere," she says. "Convergence is not about technology, it's about 'what's on'. So whether the audience clicks on a mouse, a phone or a remote control, we're going to make sure their interactive news is always there." Catherine pauses, then laughs, "We're settin' the news free, baby!"