

Circle Of Blue

Highly
focused,
niche-oriented
journalism on
the Web.



BACK BEFORE MULTIMEDIA WAS A buzzword on the Web, photojournalist J. Carl Ganter was developing a niche of his own, producing journalism for all publishing platforms. Ganter is a multimedia storytelling pioneer with experience in radio, television, magazines, and newspapers.

Today Ganter has taken on a new venture – a Web site called Circle of Blue (www.circleofblue.org), where he's the executive producer. Ganter's wife Eileen – also a talented multimedia journalist – assists with producing stories for the site. Circle of Blue is focused on protecting the world's water, a story that as a reporter Ganter sees as one of the top issues of the century. "Circle of Blue approaches the freshwater crisis with three coordinated, interrelated components: frontline journalism, existing and new science and data, and innovative communications design. Circle of Blue's reporting captures the heart through exceptional fact-based storytelling, making water issues personal and relevant while providing a hub for data visualization, aggregation, and integration. Circle of Blue applies the best

tools of the 21st century to help provide the knowledge that people need to make informed decisions," said Ganter.

Ganter keeps a very high quality quotient for every story produced on the site. "If you look at the major change points in history, there has been a very powerful iconic image that has defined that moment in history," Ganter said. "So journalism at the highest level remains one of the most powerful tools of change, and we have to use every method to put those images and multimedia reporting in front of as many people as possible."

The Web site features graphics, video, still photography, and audio throughout paired with writing with extensive research on the topic. "What we found is that when we publish in multiple formats, using different ways to enter the story, we'll have a wider audience," Ganter said.

Ganter utilizes content from a staff of seven, plus six interns. "The most exciting thing is pulling together great talent, fantastic talent, incredible photojournalists from Contact Press Images and Getty Images. Also it is inspiring to work with scientists, and members of the National



THE WORLD'S WATER. Beryl Carmichael, an Aboriginal elder on the bank of the Darling River in Australia, says, "A lot of our people have given up, but I still go down ... I bless the river. I still sing for the fish to come home." **Photograph by J. Carl Ganter**

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Academies, and to put a face on their data and their information.”

Clean in its design and informative in its presentation of stories, Circle of Blue is a Web site that should be emulated by journalists looking to get into niche publishing. Each element is one part of the whole, with no one media element overpowering another. Beautiful visuals play a major part in every story.

One such multimedia story on Inner Mongolia called “Looking Out On My Homeland” includes an innovative audio slideshow of video clips that fade to black after a few seconds on screen and are then paired with an audio track that is subtitled. The imagery is composed with the artful eye of Eric Daigh, a multimedia producer with Circle

“WE EDUCATE OUR AUDIENCE AND OUR FUNDERS TO THE POWER OF FRONTLINE STORYTELLING.”

— J. CARL GANTER

of Blue who has many skills including Web designer, film producer, and artist. “He manages the look, feel, and online strategies for the Web site,” added Ganter.

Ganter is passionate about the way multimedia is presented on the Web site. “When we approach the story we report what we need to in as many ways possible. We show how to connect the dots to understand complicated issues, and multimedia graphics are some of our highest traffic generators ... We use traditional journalism, the same backbone with the highest standards.”

Circle of Blue is a nonprofit Web site. “Every nonprofit has a problem raising dollars. Fortunately the Web is an inexpensive and nimble publishing platform,” said Ganter. “We educate our audience and our funders to the power of frontline storytelling. It is a challenge to find dollars, but funders are realizing that we all face huge challenges on the planet; we really need journalism to be our sensors on the frontlines.”

It’s important for new niche sites to have an ethics policy as they tread into new territory on the Web, as Circle of Blue is doing. Being both the journalist and the person looking for funding makes it a delicate line to walk for Ganter. “Many funders have agendas, and

we have to decide – how do we stay true to our journalistic compass?” Ganter said.

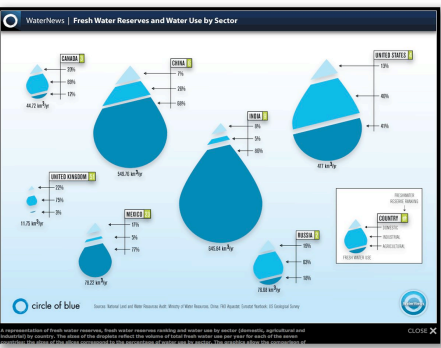
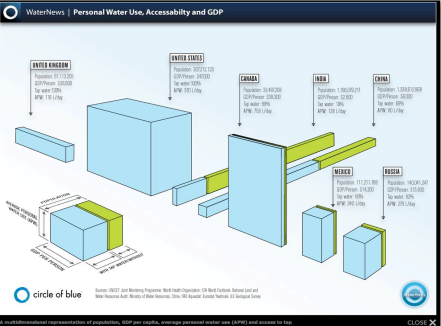
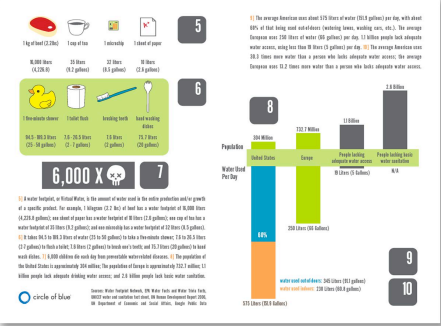
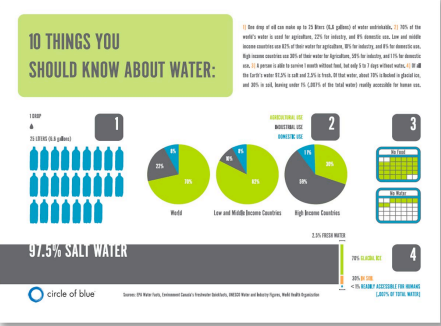
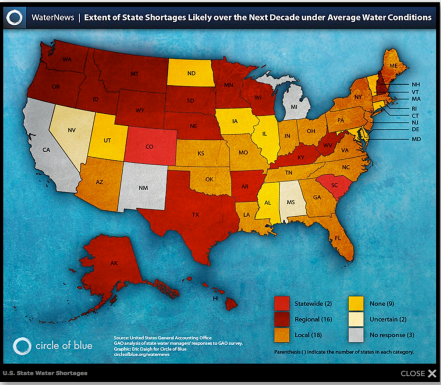
A statement from the Circle of Blue Web site written with the assistance of Dr. Bob Steele, a Nelson Poynter Scholar for Journalism Values at the Poynter Institute, says: “As a nonprofit organization, it relies on contributions, both in-kind and monetary, from multiple outside sources, but preserves a ‘church and state’ division between sponsors and content. While donors may choose to fund a particular aspect of the program, they participate with the understanding that their funding will not influence content in any way. With respect to journalistic ethics questions, Circle of Blue relies on the National Public Radio Code of Ethics and Practices, WGBH-TV standards, and the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics.”

“An expanding challenge in journalism’s realignment is how to maintain independence of funding. We are a nonprofit affiliate of the Pacific Institute, one of the leading nonpartisan think tanks focused on science and policy. This relationship allows us an additional firewall between funders and funder agendas,” Ganter said.

Circle of Blue is not without many of mainstream media’s woes. “One of the big challenges we face is that everyone is looking for a silver bullet to fix the media’s problems. There is no silver bullet. But if we hold ourselves to the same high standards of journalism and apply those to the tools of publishing, and the Web is one of those channels of distribution, it all comes back to the story and to the content.”

Ganter’s team spends a great deal of time on single stories including the writing, research, and image making. “Some major stories might take two, three, or four weeks or months to research. They’ll involve a writer, a photographer, a videographer, and a sound person, plus a researcher or scientist who is a world-class expert on the issue,” said Ganter.

So being a multimedia journalist does not always mean that you must do everything yourself: the photos, the video, audio, and text. It’s sometimes a collaborative effort. “The level of intense research is very difficult as a one-man band – I’ve done it, and it’s possible, but I find as a one-man band often times you have less time to let the story unfold because you are worried about audio or video, or finding the image – is it better for video or more for stills? – it may be a luxury in today’s world for multiple talent, but it’s hard to be exceptional at everything,” Ganter said. “For these complicated stories it is very difficult to



SEEING THE NUMBERS. Stunning graphics created by college design interns give Circle of Blue Web site readers a depth of data comprehension.



NICHE-ORIENTED JOURNALIST. Ganter’s own career path may be an example of where the publishing industry is heading. Photograph by Aaron Jaffe



GREAT INTERNS. A Northwestern University student, Aaron Jaffe won a Panavision Young Filmmaker Award. Photograph by J. Carl Ganter

do the one-man band, juggling different tools and juggling the story in your head. ... The stories are very complicated and require a lot of reporting.”

He’s taught at several multimedia workshops around the country and strives to inspire journalists to see the power of multimedia storytelling, and he’s also the author of the widely read “white paper” on audio storytelling geared toward multimedia journalists called “Sound in the Story,” a document that is a must read for multimedia storytellers.

“J. Carl has been at the forefront of the move of still photographers into the ranks of multimedia storytellers,” Keith Jenkins said. Jenkins is the supervising producer for multimedia at National Public Radio. “Along with his wife, Eileen, they were among the first people to talk about the strength of combining pictures and the audio narrative and taught those skills at workshops around the country. Somehow, at the same time, they found time to do their own stories and projects, and they have used those skills to create Circle of Blue. This is an amazing clearinghouse of information on the world’s water crisis, as well as a great example of telling stories with multiple

media. He’s put much of himself into this work, and it shows.”

Circle of Blue is also a journalism residency site for the Medill School of Journalism. “We strive for international diversity and multifaceted talents in design, art, data, writing, and photography,” Ganter said. “This past summer one intern was from Bulgaria and another was from China.” Student intern Aaron Jaffe, a sophomore at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism who has been an NPPA member since he was 16, has worked as a videographer, production assistant, and sound man on Circle of Blue assignments in Australia and China.

Ganter’s career path is an example of where the publishing industry is headed. Utilizing tools available to anyone on the Web, Ganter is paving a new path for publishing and for journalism. Highly focused, niche-oriented journalism on the Web is becoming more prevalent. Circle of Blue is a publishing model that needs to be emulated and stories like it could become a big part of journalism’s future. ■

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