Convergence Website Redesign

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Executive Summary

The research and development project that we were assigned was to create a new and improved website for the convergence interest area in the Missouri School of Journalism. Thanks to the work of a team from the fall semester of 2011, our team had thorough research of content management systems and a cursory knowledge of the needs of faculty, students and other visitors to the site. After a brief period researching and double-checking the findings from the previous team, we were able to construct a site from the framework the previous team had in place already. Our team further built and reworked the site following more qualitative research. We conducted user testing to ensure people who were not used to the site could use it with ease.

Instead of having to update 16 different pages to change the class schedules, faculty now only needs to change one page. Also, the students can download the entire syllabus onto their computers instead of relying on an Internet connection to view their syllabus information. The slider on the front page allows faculty to prominently display their students’ work with ease. Since the slider is a feature of the theme, there is a specific page where the featured content is entered: the only fields needed are a link to the story post, an image, and a very short headline and description. This has the potential to be changed every week or every month, depending on the desires of the faculty.
This also presents a unique opportunity for the project managers in the 4806 editing class. While managing a reporting team is invaluable experience, the students couldn’t point to much for their portfolio content. With this new way to display student work, the manager can take screenshots and/or links to place in their portfolios.

Also, the site now has a plugin that allows for easy calendar upkeep. The plugin has a dashboard section header that keeps it organized and easy to add or update events. This will provide for a full calendar of scholarship deadlines, internship application deadlines, RJI events, ONA events, study abroad opportunities and much more.
Overview of Previous Work

When we began this project, we were given the progress report of the previous semester’s work. Contained within it was much information that we used to jumpstart the project. Aside from being able to learn from their mistakes and experience, we were also given access to a test website that we could expand upon. From what was in the report and from the input we received from our client, the previous semester’s group focused too much on researching different content management systems (CMS) instead of putting more effort into building the site.

The research they provided cited numerous complications with the CMS capable of the most professional looking website layouts. CMS such as Drupal and Cantao required more CSS and coding experience to regularly post/update content than was advisable. One of the main concerns voiced by the faculty for the new site was the ability to showcase student work easily and the ability to update the site with ease. With this in mind, we decided to frame our project schedule as heavily focused on building the website as possible and researching afterwards.

The site they left us with was helpful since a lot of the content needing to be migrated was already there, albeit in a disorderly fashion. While the current site has been limited to an old version of Wordpress, this new site isn’t lacking any components needed to update. This provided great promise
since we knew that future projects and teams would be able to build upon the groundwork we did rather than having to start from scratch. We were also able to quickly establish our conceptions of what we did and didn’t want the site to look like since there was a rough draft already in place. Although this wasn’t the only reason we decided to use Wordpress as a CMS, it was a nice perk.

**Client Needs**

Narrowing down the needs of the client was challenged by the very nature of our goal: the website has only one client, but it serves the needs of both the faculty and the students. When conceptualizing the website and what features we were going to include or remove, balancing the needs of the two groups was always present in our decisions. Our client wanted an easily updatable site that could showcase student work, would be easier to change class information, had a more modern look and be a one-stop source of information for convergence students. The students needed information that is easy to find, easy to navigate, simple uploading procedures for stories and up-to-date help file links.

Our client relied on our own experience as students to balance the student’s needs against the faculty’s. In order to gain the faculty’s perspective, we collected thoughts, desires and concerns from the faculty members most involved in the program.
Planning and Research

Though we learned a lot from the research findings from the previous team’s report, we wanted to take a quick look at the CMS being used today. We each researched different websites for small organizations like the convergence interest area, what user reviews said about different CMS such as Drupal or Wordpress and asked the faculty for input of what they desired in the new site.

We found that most of the impressive journalism sites were either created by private companies or built from scratch. Most of the better ones that weren’t custom built sites used Wordpress. We noticed that one of the features we enjoyed the most while looking at these sites was simplicity. Many of the sites we saw were bogged down with a lot of content. Some ran the classic blog style on their home page, while others had a lot of videos cluttering the home page. Though we wanted to showcase student work, we got to see how some sites did it in a way that detracted from the featured content.

Once we all had browsed the sites and CMS styles, we decided to move forward with the Wordpress CMS. The system allows for the most versatile customization without losing the ease of the admin dashboard. Ultimately, with both faculty and students needing access to post things on the site, using a CMS with heavy coding requirements was out of the question. Wordpress allowed us to change things in the code that are static, while still
leaving the updatable elements in place and easy to change. Using Wordpress for the site also elements the need (and cost) of using C-Panel anymore.

After deciding on Wordpress, our research took us to look at themes and plugins possible. We encountered the same trends with the themes that we saw during our survey of other sites. Many of the themes tried to put too much on the front page, while some featured the text-heavy blog style and some were just poorly designed with elements that clashed. We settled on the Colorway Pro theme mostly because of the simplicity it offered alongside the sliding banner, which could be used to showcase student work, and the option for two navigation styles. While the theme only supports one navigation bar at the top, the buttons on the homepage supplemented for any secondary navigational needs. Furthermore, the banner on the home page is large and the first thing seen, giving students a good reason to do their best and compete for a spot on the slider. The clean look of the theme allows the user’s attention to focus on the important areas of the page without getting distracted by unnecessary elements.

The research into the plugins was short but thorough, based upon our client’s suggestion to avoid getting distracted by a lot of them. We used gathered faculty input to determine what functions we should look for among the different plugin types. One faculty member wanted to see an event calendar while another expressed concerns about the site’s SEO. Taking these into account, we made a list of
plugins to download and test once the site was built. Other plugins served more basic functions such as blocking spam commenting, allowing for FLV and video embedding, and creating backup files.

The only aspect left to plan before building the site was to decide on an organizational strategy. We needed to determine what pages were the most important, acting as parent pages to the rest of the content. Once we constructed a mock-up of the organization, we met with our client to go over it and any other issues that popped up after our preliminary research.

**Beta Site and User Testing**

There were two options available as we began to put the site together: either try using a database backup file to transfer all the current site’s information to the new site, or migrate all the content by hand. During a lengthy discussion with Justin Giles, the RJI IT specialist, we learned that while the former would allow a quick migration of content, we would still have to go through and smooth out any format problems that occurred during the transfer. We opted for manually building the site instead, since this would allow us the most control over the layout of the information. Using the feedback from the navigation mock-up, we decided on a navigational tree and began construction.

The quickest parts of the process were entering the necessary information into the pages. The time-consuming
tasks always involved formatting, entering CSS and changes that required altering the HTML code of particular page templates. At first, the Colorway theme came across as a little gimmicky because of built-in elements such as an area for testimonial quotes. By implementing a short custom CSS though, it is blocked from appearing on the home page. We were also able to adjust the appearance of the slider text by making the fonts smaller and by lowering the position of the description box using custom CSS.

We tried to avoid messing with any HTML code as much as possible. However, some of the problems we encountered were only solved through editing the page’s files. We removed the headline off the front page since we felt that it was redundant. We wanted the student work page to be a blogroll style, but at first it was pulling only recently added posts; whether they were class syllabi or actual student stories. By copying and altering the blogroll template file, only posts classified as “Student Work” will show up on the page feed.

Once the site was completely built, we entered the user-testing portion of our project. Since most of the convergence site users continue to be students, the focus of our testing would be towards student users. In order to ensure all student perspectives, we tested students from four main groups: non-journalism, reporting, editing and capstone students. The non-journalism students helped us see from the perspective of students looking to begin a convergence sequence. The three groups of core convergence students helped us gain the perspectives in each tier of the program. We developed multiple
tasks for each user to complete and questions to collect each user’s impressions and opinions of the site.

After compiling the data received from the users, we set out with a list of things to change for the final site. Since we were about to enter another editing phase, we also asked the faculty to look over the beta site and provide feedback on their likes and dislikes. There were some seemingly obvious things, such as adding a search box to the front page and changing page titles to better describe the content. Some of the more involved tasks regarded moving the description box on the front page slider and making the slider picture also a link to the story. However, there were no major issues that arose from the testing, so the update ran fairly quick and smooth.

Changes Decided Upon

One of the challenges website designers must face is choosing how to handle recommendations from a variety of sources. For instance, some of our user testers liked the first banner created for the beta site, while others thought it was too bright. We then designed several more banners and, based on communication among group members, created a hybrid banner incorporating some key elements that were favorably received.

One comment was about the lack of quick links on the homepage. We decided not to include them on the homepage, because we felt it would cause the homepage to become too cluttered looking. The simple, crisp design of the homepage
was too important of a strength for us to want to mess with.

We originally did not include the information for 2150, since we thought that a separate site would be ready. Because the launch of that site has been pushed back, we reincorporated the 2150 information, albeit hastily.

For the downloadable syllabi, Amy pointed out that these were available as doc files, which can be manipulated. We recommend that the faculty keep the download option on the site; however, instead of docs, PDFs can easily be uploaded.

Problems Encountered

Often, what we were able to do with the site was limited to our ability to manipulate the CSS or the html code. While trial and error combined with combing support forums frequently yielded desirable results, the finer aspects of designing the website were often unattainable. If something relying on altering html code was proving too difficult and there was no plugin available for that particular function, then we had to mostly abandon the element.

One such problem arose when we tried to insert a banner on the front page to display the convergence journalism partners. The plugins available wouldn’t allow for the idea we had in mind. While some wouldn’t let the user designate which images to show, others wouldn’t display the image properly and still more wouldn’t embed the hyperlink on the images properly.
Time constraints also became an issue throughout the semester. Aside from our schedules outside the class, we spent a lot of time on figuring out how to change elements with HTML or CSS. Because of our lack of extensive coding experience, these tasks took much longer to do. This problem was compounded by the sheer sluggishness of the server connection. For reasons unknown to us, whenever we were editing material through the Wordpress dashboard or the root files on the server, the connection speed obviously slowed down. Pages could take up to 2 minutes to load each time, regardless of the computer’s cookie cache. This issue caused us the most loss of time than any of the other problems we encountered.

The most disappointing problem we encountered throughout the project was that one of our team members stopped doing any work and then completely stopped showing up only a short while into the semester. Even though he hadn’t contributed much in the beginning and we didn’t lose much by losing him, the experience definitely had a negative impact on the group and the project. Time and energy that could have been spent building a better and more effective website was instead spent on frustrations arising from his dereliction of any responsibility.
SUSTAINABILITY

USER NAMES AND PASSWORDS:

New Site Root Access
  user: root
  Password: deron2011

New Site Admin Access
  User: admin
  Password: cvgtigers12

YouTube Channel Access:
  User: mucvgjour@gmail.com
  Password: fishbowl42

To keep the site content up to date, especially on the homepage, we propose that project managers should be responsible for posting successful 4804 team stories. They would first need to actually make a new post with the content. If there is a video element, the project manager would need to upload it to the convergence YouTube channel and then embed it into the post.

In order to embed YouTube video, simply put a “v” after the http part of the URL such as this:

httpv://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXFsPj5g7XE
To ensure the post goes into the archive of student work, the project manager must select "Student Work" from the categories option from the menu to the right of the content editing area.

Also, if the post is to look correct on the ‘student work’ page, the project manager must make sure they upload an image to act as the ‘featured image.’

After publishing the post, the project manager would need to include it on the homepage slider, found under Appearance>Theme Options. A three or four word headline must be entered under ‘slide heading’ and a one-sentence description must be entered under ‘slide description.’ They would then need to upload an image for the slider, preferably 900 px by 350 px under the ‘slide image’ field. Lastly the correct post link must be entered under ‘slide heading link.’
We included a calendar on the site. Since Karen says Sarah Henderson could always use something to do, we propose that she add content to this. The calendar is its own plugin and has its own section in the admin dashboard. Entry and managing of events should be self-explanatory based upon the fields available for each event. Events in the School of Journalism, the Reynolds Journalism Institute or even major campus events should be included. Deadlines for internship applications or scholarships would also be good to add.
There will only be a few issues once the site goes live:
- domain name needs to be switched over to new site
- to increase SEO, the site’s link settings must be updated to a search-friendly organization
- Justin needs to set up the server to allow ftp connections from the wordpress admin page

Switching the domain name should be easy enough for Justin to accomplish, since he knows how to do it properly. However, once the url changes, the in-site reference links will be inaccurate since they point to the “174.37.47.226/convergence” domain. We would recommend solving this problem and updating the permalink settings at the same time since both will require all internal links to be corrected. To change the permalink settings, simply go to the dashboard>settings>permalink settings. We recommend the ‘post name’ link organization.

As the site stands now, Wordpress doesn’t have authority to rewrite any files located on the server because the ftp has not been set up--these files can only be accessed via the back-door with a Cyberduck-like client. This means all updates have to be manually uploaded and the spam blocker doesn’t work properly. Once this is enabled, updating will be easy and the akismet plugin will block spam comments effectively.