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Flavorly: An Online Food Magazine

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Flavorly: Reflections on an Online Magazine

By Meredith Popolo

Capstone Summary

A description of the project:

For my Capstone project, I am creating an online magazine. Called *Flavorly*, the magazine covers the food scene in upstate New York, as well as some national food news. New content is posted every week day, and I am trying to develop a schedule so that standard features appear regularly. Currently, Tuesday runs a Tiny Tastes Better clip, which highlights a regular food topic that I reduce down for presentation. For example, I have covered Swedish Meatballs, pizza bites, and miniature cannoli. I hope to establish Monday as a day for a summary of national food news, Wednesday as a day for Q&A's with interesting members of the local food community, Thursday as a day for features, and Friday as a day for reviews.

A brief, non-technical discussion of the methods used

I've essentially been researching for this project since my sophomore year, taking from my magazine classes knowledge about creating a magazine, and specifically, a web publication. In MAG 205, Introduction to Magazine, I did a comprehensive project on *Robb Report*, a luxury magazine. I spoke with the editor in chief, as well as many other writers, editors, and advertisers. I analyzed the website, discussing pros and cons. In NEW 205 and NEW 305, I

learned the basic news writing and reporting skills, which I've found to be very helpful when writing summaries of national food news. MAG 406 and MAG 408, magazine writing and editing classes, have fine-tuned my article writing. Additionally, MAG 518, critical writing, taught me how to look critically at restaurants and experiences to write an unbiased review. MAG 500, writing and editing for magazine websites, taught through Skype by an editor at *Men's Health*, has perhaps taught me the most about creating my own website. Through the class, we learned how to keep web writing succinct and how to package stories with sidebars, slideshows, videos, and mobile applications. While mobile applications are out of my ability at the moment, I have begun to create slideshows and multimedia extensions.

On March 1, I began producing original content to publish every day. It's very hard to keep up with the website daily, but I am learning to stockpile evergreen stories over the weekends and use them when news runs slow. It is easy to fall behind in updates, and I know that if the site had a large following, infrequent posts would deter readers from returning. For the most part, I have been going out to do my own reporting, but without a car it's often difficult and expensive to get to interviews and restaurants. However, I have started to syndicate some news. While I still write my own briefs, as many other news websites do, I can link to other articles and provide my readers with an outlet to more information. This keeps readers returning

because there is constantly new information, but I must be careful that I still continue to do my own reporting.

To design my website, I am using weebly.com, a site that makes web design user-friendly. I have a very limited knowledge of html, so Weebly allows me to lay out a page, upload multimedia, post articles, and link to other pages rather simply. I have changed up the design several times to try to make the homepage more digestible for readers. However, when I post a new article, I must redesign the homepage so that the new story gets forefront attention, and at the moment this process is time consuming and inefficient. I have recently added an archive list, which is essentially a story roll of all my articles, making it easy for my Honors Reader, as well as my viewers, to access all the content on the site. Unfortunately, I have not yet found a widget by Weebly that supports archives, so at the moment it is unsightly.

I took the opportunity this past week to overhaul the site. I enlisted the opinions and help of my sister, who has web design experience. She pointed me in the right direction, and gave suggestions to make the design sleeker. I have tried to stick with a uniform post design, keeping all titles, dates, and copy in the same colors and font sizes. Additionally, I used kuler.com to help me envision a cohesive color scheme. The site lets users choose a base color, and recommends accent colors that compliment the scheme. To inspire my design, I've been looking to other magazine websites such as Gawker and Eater. They contain lots of information on the homepage, and also take

advantage of multimedia. I aim to take higher quality pictures, and package more of my stories with additional slideshows, videos, and links. As my site continues to mature, I will seek the opinions of others with experience. This week, I am having lunch with Marla Meridith, a Newhouse alum who now runs her own food site called familyfreshcooking.com. I'm eager to get tips from her about maintaining a food site, and may even ask for her critique of mine. I'd also like to meet with Professor Aileen Gallagher, who has experience with Grub Street, another food website. Professor Gallagher will hopefully give me frank feedback regarding areas I can improve.

Another issue I am wrestling with is the voice of my articles. I have intentionally kept my face out of the website to avoid becoming to blog-ish; however, many of my posts include "I." I've noticed that other websites that have consistent columnists use "I" as well, but I don't currently love the tone it sets for my site. This is an issue that I will experiment with and decide as the site evolves.

As the Capstone deadline nears, I have started to think about what this means for *Flavorly*.com. My project is a living one, meaning it is never finished. I aim to continue generating new content up until the turn in date, but even after that I hope to grow my site for my own experience. So far, I love learning new things about web design and covering issues relevant to the Syracuse food scene. However, when I move away from Syracuse, the coverage will have to change. I plan to return home to Boston for a while,

and then ultimately move to New York City. *Flavorly* will likely be

relocating with me.

A discussion of the project's significance

Throughout my four years at Syracuse University, the magazine journalism

program has changed greatly to reflect the current state of the industry.

Incoming students now take classes specifically geared towards multimedia,

but when I was a freshman, learning SoundSlides was merely a footnote in

some of our discussions. As I've gotten older, I've seen more web-based

classes develop, such as the writing and editing for magazine websites class

that I took. Through coursework, I've learned the basics of pitching, writing,

and packaging for the web, but through my Capstone project, I've taught

myself the practicalities of actually developing and maintaining a website.

In the magazine industry, websites are growing into more than just an online

extension of the magazine, but rather, in many cases, a whole new species of

their own. Some magazines exist entirely on the Internet, while others are

still affiliated with a print publication. Regardless, understanding and

embracing the web is an increasingly crucial part of the magazine industry.

Being able to publish content around the clock and interact with readers so

easily is drastically reshaping magazine journalism.

As I look for jobs, having learned basics of running a website will make me a

much more appealing applicant. I look forward to sharing my site with

potential employers and using it to supplement my portfolio. *Flavorly*.com is

not only helpful for my career search, but will also help me to remain

competitive and innovative in the industry.

*Flavorly***: Reflections on an Online Magazine**

I.   Introduction

For my honors capstone project, I have spent months designing and creating content for an online food magazine titled *Flavorly* (www.falvorly.com). The site reports on the culinary scene in Upstate New York, but also covers national food news as well.

Many factors influenced my design and editorial decisions. When considering layout, my goal was to create a sleek website with an invisible design. By that, I mean that readers should naturally focus on the editorial content, rather than be distracted by the design. The voice, angle, and content of articles are always very intentional. In the following pages, I will explain my objectives behind the many details of *Flavorly*.

Purpose

The purpose of the site is two-fold. Firstly, when first conceiving a project idea, I wanted to produce an end product that would supplement my portfolio. While I currently have clips from both print and web publications, I wanted to show proudly something more interactive and innovative to potential employers. In an age where the viability of print magazines is disputable, online extensions of print magazines are becoming imperative. Many magazine websites now provide additional content, blogs, slideshows, videos, and interactive activities for users in between monthly issues. In some

cases, magazines even exist solely online. Thus, understanding what it takes to maintain an online magazine, from design to editorial, is a very attractive quality in a potential employee. By undertaking this project, I hoped to gain these skills, making me more appealing in the job market.

Secondly, I wanted to fill the Upstate New York food blog void. Central New York is rich with scenic vineyards, agriculture, great restaurants, and interesting culinary characters of which many natives are unaware. *Flavorly* shines a spotlight on the unique culinary qualities of Syracuse and the surrounding cities.

Audience

Originally, I planned to focus on the university audience. However, as my project grew, I realized that more than just college students would be interested in the topics that I was covering. For instance, the "Bienvenudos a Marshall Street, Chipotle" article (published April 5, 2011) included interviews with students and targeted those who frequent Marshall Street most often: college kids. In contrast, the "Naughty and Spice" article (published April 1, 2011) had a wider audience because it was not exclusive to the Syracuse campus. The article jumped across the ocean to examine a trend in Britain, but tied back to those in the States.

Time Frame

I considered my fall semester my main research time, and this spring semester my main "action" months. Last semester, I took MAG 500, Writing and Editing For Magazine Websites, taught by Kevin Donahue, an editor at Men's Health in Emmaus, PA. The class, taught over Skype, informed me about the differences between writing for print and writing for web. First off, the copy must be much short, and there must be a lot of visuals to keep the reader interested. Also, the heds and deks must be catchy yet clear, something I struggled with a great deal. I also learned how to package stories and make them more searchable with SEO and meta.

This spring semester, I put all my research and learning into action. Over January and February I focused on designating sections to certain days (like Tiny Tastes Better every Tuesday). I also analyzed similar websites to visualize a layout for my site. I will talk to this point in depth later. My goal was to beginning posting content on March 1, and continue posting every weekday until April 27th, the turn in date. However, when reporting on original content, I found it very hard to conduct several interviews, take pictures, and write up a post on my own each day. For this reason, I fell behind on some posts, and ended up re-reporting on some national news using links instead. Overall, I stayed on my planned schedule, which even included a site overhaul halfway through.

II.   Project Platform

When originally conceiving the project, I aimed to create a magazine website, rather than a blog. This concept sent me talking to a lot of people and reading many blogs and websites.

Differentiating a Blog from a Website

At the onset of the project, I would have said that a magazine website had standing featuring, with multimedia features like videos and photo galleries. The articles would be more extensively researched, with several interviews and background information. In contrast, I would have quickly labeled a blog as a flighty site based around one person, with mostly all the articles written in first person. The posts might all be centered on one topic, like nail polish or jeans, but the writing would be un-edited and directionless. Also, rather than having linking pages, the blog would basically be laid out as one very long page.

What I found through discussions and research is that the differences between blogs and websites are quickly converging. Today, many blogs and websites use the same content managing systems but look vastly different. After speaking with Aileen Gallagher, I discovered the professional-looking Grub Street uses WordPress, a site that I previously used to create a very juvenile blog.

Discovering Weebly

Therefore, the quest began to find the right content management system for my online food magazine. Since I was already familiar with WordPress and Tumblr, I did not want to create it using those. I hoped to teach myself a new content management system, and when a friend mentioned Weebly, I immediately began designing my site.

Platform Limitations

 I quickly found Weebly to have many limitations. While it is very simple to create new pages, insert multimedia, link to internal and external pages, and organize pages, there were many things I wanted to do that Weebly wouldn't allow. For example, to clean up the homepage, I hoped to create a three-column design, using two columns for recent content, and the third right hand column for archives, ads, or external links. However, Weebly only allows for two-column design, and does not even have an archive tool. Instead, I had to settle for a homepage design that I don't love, and I created my own archive tool which looks very unprofessional. Without understanding HTML or coding, I am not able to fool around with different fonts and spacing, which again makes the site look unwelcoming.

***Flavorly* is Born**

Perhaps the hardest part of starting my website was deciding on a name. Before I could craft a true mission for my magazine, I felt it needed the

perfect name to act as a backbone for its identity. Knowing that my magazine would be focused around the culinary scene, I wanted it to be a food-centric name. Although the site currently reports mainly on Central New York, I didn't want Syracuse to be part of the name. Since I plan to continue with my magazine website after the capstone project has ended, and I don't plan to stay in the area, I wanted the name to be able to evolve with me. For example, if I move to New York City, I didn't want to be stuck with a name like OrangeEats or SyraSnacks that would be rooted in place.

As I do when brainstorming ideas for heds and deks, I wrote out a large web of words related to food and cuisine. I took the words and combined some, playing with alliteration and puns. I was searching for a fun, silly name that didn't make too much sense. Also, as with great sites and products, I wanted a name that had potential to become part of the vernacular. Sites like tastespotting.com, eater.com, slashfood.com, seriouseats.com, and grubstreet.com all inspired me. Part of me was frustrated that someone had thought up these domains before I had. I tossed around names like FoodFete, FlavorFete, Taste-o-Rama, Semifreddo, and finally, *Flavorly*. When I said the word *Flavorly*, I instantly pictured it on a banner at the top of my site. I heard devoted followers using it to describe delicious dishes. I loved the name, but my friends and family didn't share the same sentiments. Luckily, it only took me a few minutes to disregard their opinions. Months later, I still find the name fun and endearing and, thankfully, I'm not tired of it.

To further declare my magazine as a website rather than a blog, I also wanted the name to be my own domain, rather than a subdomain like [www.*Flavorly*.wordpress.com](www.Flavorly.wordpress.com). I let the name *Flavorly* settle for a few days to make sure it stuck, and then quickly purchased the domain before someone else could take it.

III.   Story Ideation

The most intriguing stories on my favorite food websites had many interactive elements. As I explained with the limitations to Weebly, many of the concepts I thought up were not executable on the platform I chose. However, I tried to shake up the variety of content on my site as much as possible.

Content

In some cases, I wrote profiles and reviews of local culinary faces and restaurants. For my travel writing class, I worked with a partner to script, film, and edit a video about the Chocolate Pizza Company in Marcellus, NY. This clip added great diversity to the site, and I hope to create and post more in the future. In some cases, I interviewed personalities for a story, and ended up also posting the Q&A as well. For example, on April 1, I detailed the "Supermarket Scrabble" phenomenon and reported on its April Fool's Day Bonanza Event. I spoke with the inventor of the sport, and ended up posting the Q&A with him as an extension because he was such a funny character. I

also supplemented the story with a photo gallery of amusing "supermarket scrabbles."

For the most part, I tried to cover the culinary scene in Syracuse and the surrounding Central New York area. There is certainly no lack of interesting news or characters. I reported on the opening of Chipotle on Marshall Street, National Pancake Day at the IHOP on Erie Boulevard, free treats and coffee given out by Starbucks on several occasions, and the newest food truck, Hoagie Haven, parked just off Euclid Avenue. Reporting on a tight deadline, as I've learned over and over again in almost every Newhouse class, gets tricky when sources are unresponsive. Many great story leads have disintegrated because sources fell through. In several cases, I tried my best to report on the story anyway by linking to press releases and other credible sources.

Meeting my goal of posting articles every day has been troublesome because as a daily website, content must constantly be updated and thus is sensitive to time. In some instances, news would be slow and I resorted to reporting on national news. The post on Ben & Jerry's Free Cone Day generated much interest, although because no locations exist in the area, I tried to localize it by inserting a Google Map to the nearest location in Rochester. Also, the March 10 post, "Does Cornell Eat Better Than Syracuse?" was a syndication of a article written by *The Wall Street Journal.* While I didn't produce much

original content because of inaccessibility to sources, I linked to the story and repositioned it to pit Cornell University against Syracuse University.

Weekly Columns

One of the most successful approaches to generating content was posting a standing column. For my Magazine Editing class last fall, I was required to keep a blog. I wrote posts about tiny foods, and reran this content each Tuesday under the Tiny Tastes Better section. Having a weekly column gave my site much more consistency. Readers could return every Tuesday and expect another installment of tiny foods. Additionally, I created a Free Food section, under which I post food deals. This section isn't consistent, since it relies on third parties. Cheryl Brody Franklin, an editor at InStyle.com gave me valuable feedback on my site and said, "I like the "Free Food" channel--I would go there every day if you had something to update." This service-oriented section of my site keeps readers returning.

Voice

As stressed in every single magazine class I have taken, each magazine has a very unique voice. As *Flavorly* has grown over the past two months, I have noticed that the voice has developed. I have become more comfortable writing for my audience, and I have taken some risks. Though the voice of the articles has generally stayed constant, the content has branched out. For example, the "#HashtagHysteria" post is cute, while the "Starbucks' Free

Coffee Brews Religious Debate," hits on a snarkier note. Getting creative in posts loosens up the writing and has allowed the true *Flavorly* voice to shine through.

IV.   Photography

Throughout the duration of creating and posting new content, I have struggled with photography. I have a very basic digital camera and prior to the project, no experience in photography. In several cases, I used creative commons stock photos to illustrate my articles, as other websites often do. Other times, I used photos from other blogs, making sure to credit them. In the instances when I took my own photos, such as the Candy Man profile, I was unhappy with the way they turned out.

I recently found an article on Serious Eats which has helped me understand food photography and gives advice which I will enlist in the future. The article, "The Serious Eats Guide to Food Photography," shares 12 tips and a glossary to help amateur food writers like myself take and edit professional-looking photos. The article acknowledges that "food blog photography is completely different from professional food photography. Most of the time, we're working in low-light situations where we neither have the time nor the ability to set up lighting rigs or even an off-camera flash, for that matter." The following are simplified tips suggested by the article:

1. Pay attention to the light

2. Do NOT use in-camera flash

3. Don't always shoot from a regular sitting level

4. Shoot multiple angles and exposures

5. Be mindful of your aperature

6. Adjust the white balance

7. Use the macro setting

8. Get close

9. Use multiple exposure drive mode

10. Keep camera steady

11. Bring leftovers home, if necessary, and reheat

12. Post-edit

After learning more about food photography, I am dying to get a better camera to experiment with exposure, aperture, and shutter speeds. Hopefully, this will give my website more credibility.

V.   Re-Design

At the end of March, I submitted my magazine for analysis and redesign advice. I sent my site to friends and family to get feedback, and also met with Aileen Gallagher, Syracuse University assistant professor and former editor of Grub Street, *New York Magazine*'s food blog.

Critiques from Aileen Gallagher

Professor Gallagher gave me much encouragement and valuable insight into ways I could improve *Flavorly*. Most importantly, she recommended that I put the site in context by adding an "About" page which explains the mission of the magazine.

Professor Gallagher also suggested creating more hierarchy on the homepage. This idea, I told her, was very difficult using Weebly, because the layout constraints allowed for little design freedom. While I did try to improve visual hierarchy by better categorizing stories, Professor Gallagher recommended that I switch to WordPress. Eventually, I do plan to move my content over to WordPress in hopes of creating a more user friendly design, but at that point in my capstone process, I was not ready to completely switch over.

One last critique Professor Gallagher had was that my heds and deks fit qualities of print magazine, but were not suited for web journalism. While they were witty, they were too long and unclear. For example, "Naughty and Spice," she said, was cutesy but did not tell readers what to expect, and thus wouldn't get them to click on the piece. After meeting with her, I tried to focus my heds and deks without getting boring. "Bienvenudos a Marshall Street, Chipotle," clearly explains to the reader (though in Spanish) what the article is about in a creative yet succinct way. The story I published on April

25, which spotlighted a religious debate sparked on a Starbucks comment page, was hard for me to title in a few words. The clip contained many ideas, but I couldn't include them all in the hed. I decided that "Starbucks free coffee" and "religious debate" were necessary to include. The word "brews" plays up the fact that coffee stirred the controversy. Thus, I was very proud of my final hed, "Starbucks' Free Coffee Brews Religious Debate."

Design Advice from the Family

During my re-design phase, I also consulted my sister, who always has plenty of opinions. From her, I received mostly positive feedback, which I considered a huge compliment. As a web-designer with a keen eye for detail, she evaluated my color scheme and helped me create a more cohesive design.

She directed me to a website called kuler, an Adobe web-hosted application devised to generate color themes and inspire projects. By choosing a central color, the application automatically recommends complimentary accent colors, creating a cohesive scheme. The site also has thousands of existing color themes created by other users. I spent hours combing through different color combinations, finding the perfect one for *Flavorly*. Initially, I envisioned lots of purples and melon colors. However, such a combination proved to be too girly, and I aimed to reach both a male and female audience. Instead, I chose a blue for the background, which is easy on the eye and looks very presentable on the computer. I wanted a bright yellow, as well, but that

color strains the eye. Therefore, I opted for a similar orange, which works well with the blue but doesn't overwhelm the reader. Other accent colors are very neutral so as not to distract the reader.

## VI.	Looking Forward

Although April 27 marks the honors capstone project turn-in day, I will passionately continue to post content to *Flavorly*. Story ideation has become exhilarating for me. Walking around campus, every conversation or meal has potential to become an article. Posting every day now feels more natural than abandoning my site for a day. While constantly updating my online magazine has been daunting and more difficult than I imagined, it has prepared me to enter the world of online magazines.

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