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Professional Resource:

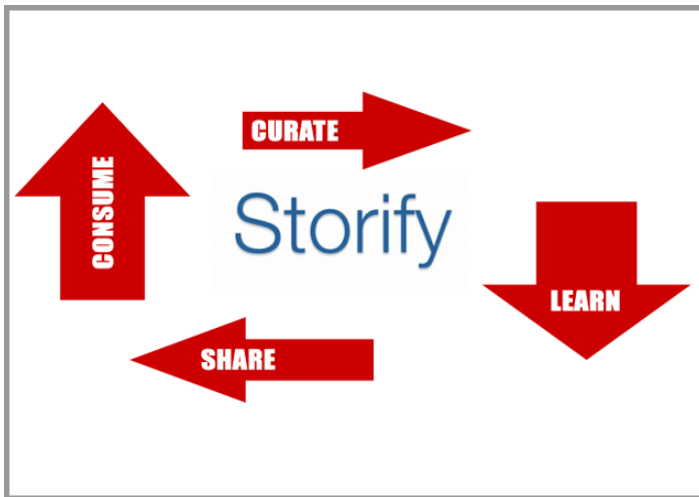
*Storify* (2011)

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*Storify*

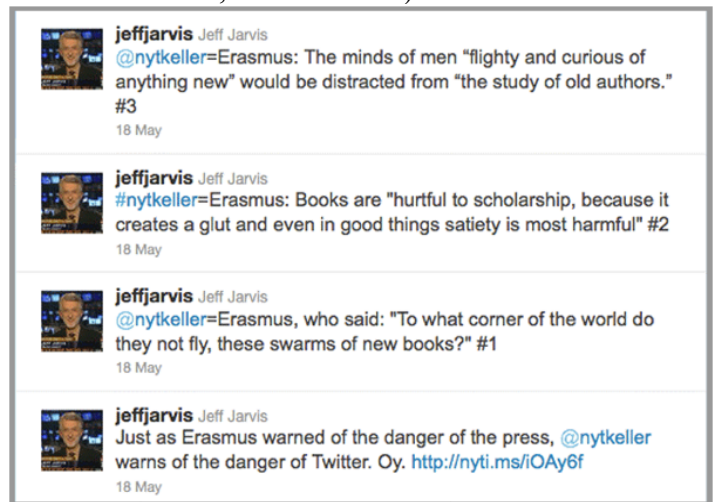
<http://storify.com/>



Social media is a huge distraction to students. That much we know. If they're not Facebooking they're consuming billions of bytes of data via TV, web and mobile screens. The sheer quantity of content being streamed via the web is mind-numbing. In April 2011, CNN's TechFortune reported that more than 30 billion pieces of information travel across Facebook each month along with 4 billion tweets on Twitter. As the reporter JP Mangalindan sagely noted, with these kind of numbers it feels less like a stream and more like a deluge.

A 2009 study by the Pew Research Center found that 73 percent of teenagers, and 72 percent of under-30s, were active on social networks. We can only assume those numbers have increased since then. There are concerns, most recently voiced in May 2011 by Bill Keller, the editor of *The New York Times* that the media deluge is corroding our brains. "Twitter and YouTube are nibbling away at our attention spans," he said in a closely argued piece titled "The Twitter Trap."

The Twitterverse was quick to react with CUNY journalism professor Jeff Jarvis one of the most trenchant critics. Likening Keller to Erasmus, Jarvis heaped scorn on Keller via his Twitter account (which reaches some 68,214 followers).



But Keller makes a valid point. The tidal wave of information can and does drown out context because of the sheer volume.

This is where a tool like Storify comes in. If social media is killing context, Storify can help journalists and students put it back together again. Storify was initially aimed at journalists but it is increasingly applicable in the classroom as it helps teach students how to contextualize the streams of social media information. Co-founder Burt Herman is a former reporter for the Associated Press and he describes Storify as a modern version of the storied wire service: "It's about creating 21st century wire posts that are dynamic stories that can be embedded across the web," he says.

At its heart, Storify allows journalists to embed dynamic images, text, tweets, even Facebook status updates, and then knit these all together with

background and context provided by the journalist. It's old-fashioned research and reporting with a decidedly new spin. Canadian tech journalist Mathew Ingram even called it the "the future of media." "We have so many real-time streams now, we're all drowning," says Herman. "So Storify lets you pick out the most important pieces, amplify them and give them context."

A key theme here is "curation." Journalists can create and curate the news by merging traditional reporting with the information transmitted from social media. Now, so can students.

Purists, myself included, may shudder at the use of the word "consume" but it is difficult to use any other word to define the current news experience. We are viewing, reading and participating online now. It's not just print and broadcast anymore.

Herman came up with the idea for Storify after spending a year as a Knight Fellow at Stanford University in 2009. An AP foreign correspondent for some 12 years, Herman says he wanted to spend some time thinking about the future of journalism. Storify is his vision of what that future could look like.

Storify is already being used by journalists in Canada, the U.S., and Australia to report on big events such as the Feb. 2011 revolution in Egypt. On Friday Feb. 11, Twitter registered some 33,000 #Egypt tweets an hour when embattled President Hosni Mubarak announced he would resign. It was information overload. Journalists at CBC in Canada, *The Washington Post* in the U.S., and ABC in Australia turned to Storify to make sense of the chaos. As Herman describes it, "it was real-time reporting in a social media world." Three examples are shown here:

Figure 1

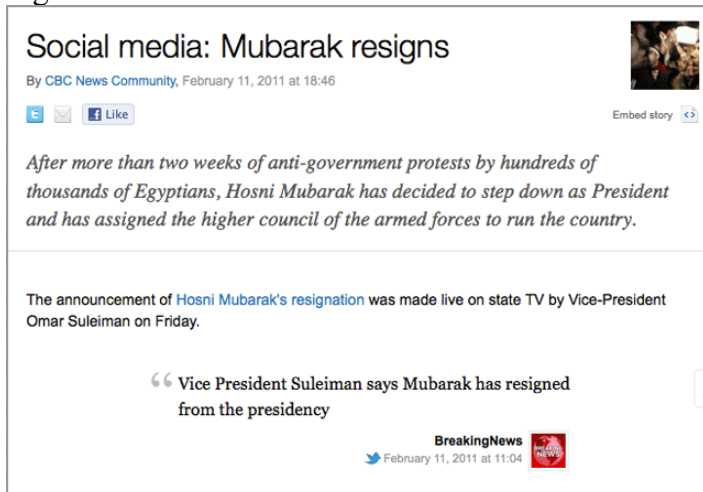


Figure 2

# The Washington Post

3:00 p.m. World leaders react

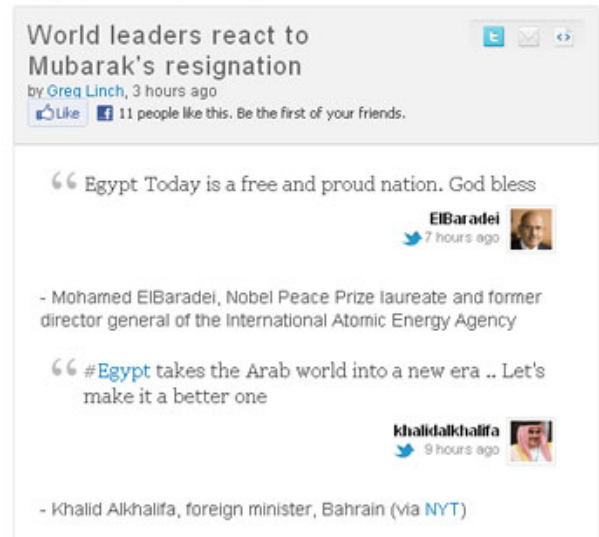


Figure 3



The preceding examples show how Storify can be used to enhance journalists' reports. Teachers can use it in a similar way for assignments.

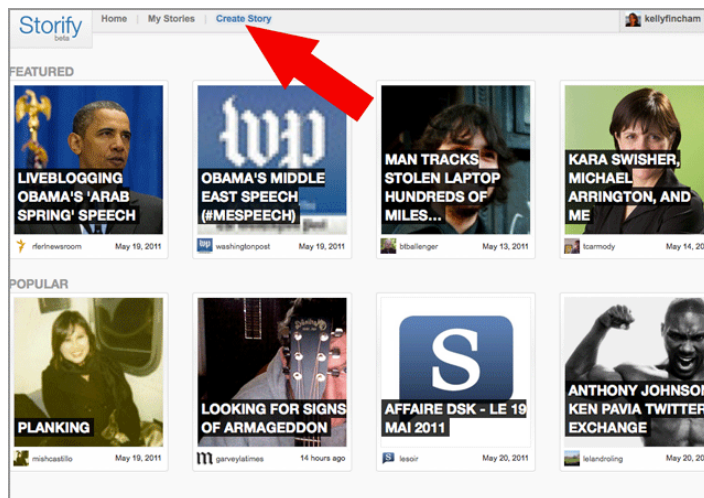
Herman advises teachers to define a topic before using Storify for assignments. Then once you have the topic, the students can start searching for reliable sources. "For example, if a teacher wanted to talk about the Middle East peace talks, you could start by doing a search for trusted sources," he says.

These searches for reliable sources show students how social media can be used for more serious purposes. Herman says Storify can help students learn how to avoid unsourced opinions and speculation. For instance, a search for Middle East peace talks would start with a search for the White House Twitter account and perhaps also President Obama's Twitter account.

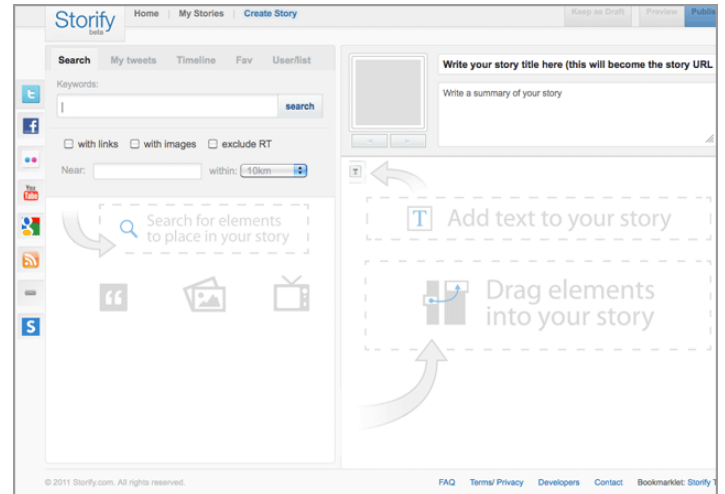
Storify was launched in Sept. 2010 and accounts were invite-only until April 2011. The site is now open to everyone and the only thing students need is a Twitter account.



The interface is fairly simple and easy to use. Once logged in via Twitter, Storify will direct you to a page like this:



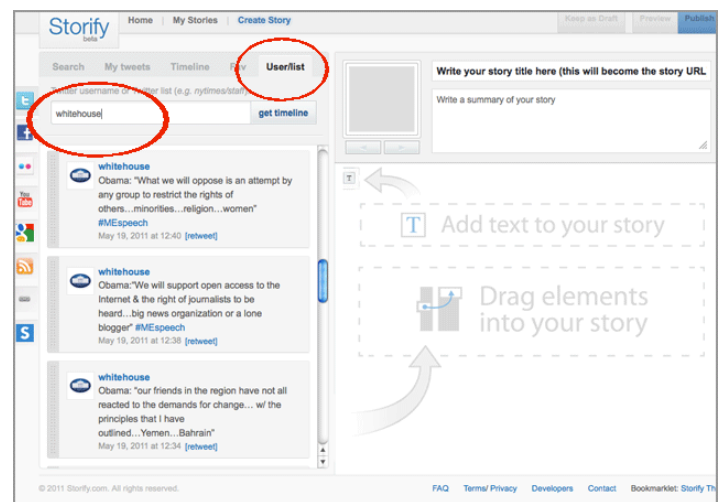
Select "Create Story" to get to work! Once selected, Storify will bring you to a page like this:



The page is divided into two panes; the left-hand side contains all the source material and the right-hand side contains the title, overview and whichever embedded links the user chooses.

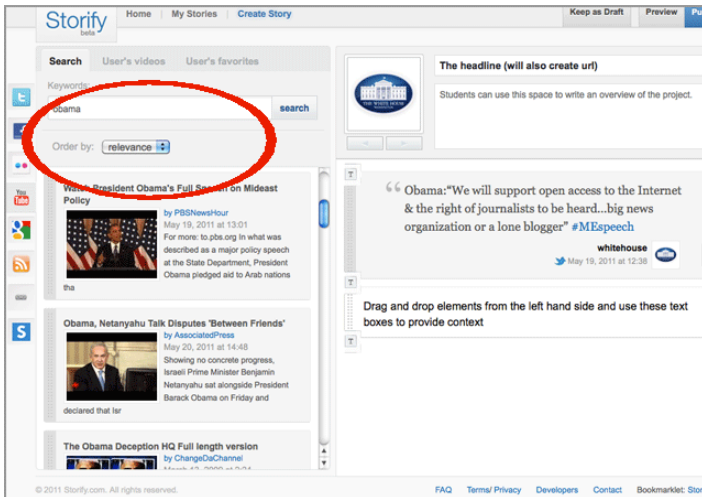
The very first column on the left lists the sources which are available to Storify: Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Google Search, RSS feeds, a regular hyperlink and stories from other Storify users. Depending on which search type is chosen, Storify also offers additional filters. For instance, in the example shown above, Storify can filter the search results based on whether the results have links, images, retweets and geographic location.

As Herman advised, the best place for students to start is by searching for reliable sources using the user/list section as shown below:



In this search we are looking for “whitehouse” to begin looking for reliable sources on the topic. Once the student finds the user or list, they can then begin trawling through the tweets to find the relevant hashtag, in this case #MEspeech (hashtags are similar to keywords in Twitter. Conversations are tagged with short keyphrases to help people find any related tweets on the same topic).

Once students find relevant results, they can drag the items over to the right-hand side pane as shown below:



This interface also helps students develop a sense of copyright on the web. All the images and text are directly attributable to the owner, which helps students avoid getting into trouble with copyright issues. Storify also enables students to find experts and then quote them directly.

The service also offers students a way to archive tweets on selected events. One of Twitter’s major drawbacks is the lack of a real archive. Sure, they’re sending all the tweets to the Library of Congress but it’s almost impossible for the rest of us to actually store them. Tweets have a shelf-life of about two weeks and unless you have some heavy-duty programming knowledge, tweets on a particular issue, say #mespeech, will die off.

This is one of Storify’s best applications. All the tweets used in the story will stay there forever as Storify copies over the data and stores it on their server. “The tweets won’t go away even if the person deletes them,” Herman says. He says this is important for public records. “Our thinking on this is like saying something in public. It’s public record once it’s out there.”

In addition, all the tweets and photos retain their original features along with the metadata such as

location and links. Once the elements are pulled into the Storify template, users can hover over things like the Twitter handle for more information. This information would be lost in a straight cut and paste. Students can add their own reporting and comment to the embedded elements and once the piece is published it can be shared via Twitter or Facebook. For example, teachers could assign topics and require students to include a set amount of elements and also check the sourcing.

Herman says Storify’s education value is in teaching students how to filter out the noise and identify reliable sources. “It’s not an algorithm. It is a way of teaching students to question information and how to put it in context. You want people to figure out what they are doing and not blindly putting something together.”

Storify is an updated version of standard old-school reporting. It’s a way for students to gather material and sift through it without having to do the old-fashioned research which would be impractical for a non-journalist. The web is home to a rich, diverse source of information and Storify pushes students to think about how they can verify that information. “It’s a huge value to be able to check out the sources. Students get that more than anybody because they see how fast rumours can spread on Facebook,” says Herman.

Talking of Facebook brings us back to Twitter, and Keller’s comments. Herman, unsurprisingly disagrees with Keller. “It’s stupid to say Twitter makes you stupid,” he says. “Does paper make you stupid? You can have a trashy tabloid on it or you can have a quality broadsheet like The New York Times. Paper, like Twitter, is just a form of communication. Yes, of course there is a lot of poor content out there but that doesn’t mean the medium is to blame.”

Herman believes that in his own way, Keller proved the case for Storify. “Storify provides a filter function, to filter out the poor content and unreliable sources. Students can use Storify to verify which accounts make sense. There are voices on Twitter that matter and Storify is a way of reaching them.”

Students are already living in the social media world and Storify provides a way of telling their stories. It’s an engaging way for students to learn how to work out what’s true and what’s speculation.

As a former wire editor for national newspapers in Australia and Ireland I used to have Reuters, AP, etc. on my desktop. Now we all have access to a much larger feed. Students have the whole world to sort through. For my part, I have found that Facebook encourages

the shy members of the class to speak up in a way they never did during traditional class. A recent story in *The New York Times* supported this idea of using social media in the classroom.

I have also found that using Twitter has taught them how to look for sources and news and Storify has helped teach them how to think about and write context and narrative. Now if only I could find something that would help them hand their projects in on time!