10.2: From the Field-Process Engineering Helped Build a Replicable Model for Two Startup News Sites

Kat Friedrich is a news editor at Yale University. She runs two startup news sites: Clean Energy Finance Forum,[1] which covers the niche vertical of the solar power industry and the energy efficiency industry deeply; and Conservation Finance Network,[2] a nonprofit partnership site that covers all aspects of ecosystem conservation from cities to oceans. She works at Yale Center for Business and the Environment, which encourages startup green business development.

As an editor who had worked in web-intensive writing roles related to energy efficiency and science education, Friedrich was adept in web editing and online media. She had a master’s degree in Science and Environmental Journalism from The Nelson Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. But it is her project-management experience from a prior career in mechanical engineering that serves her most when leading the Clean Energy Finance Forum and Conservation Finance Network site teams, which have grown to 27 and 20 student staff respectively since their inception.

Clean Energy Finance Source was created by Friedrich in 2012 for Clean Energy Finance Center, a national nonprofit. Yale Center for Business and the Environment brought the site on board in January 2014 and expanded it extensively to include new technologies, international news, web interaction, and online tools.

Conservation Finance Network’s web news production began in January 2016 in response to a request from two graduate students, Meaghan McGrath and Logan Yonavjak, who were both at Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. The second site was developed as a branded partnership with Conservation Finance Network, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC.

As she started the news sites from the ground up, Friedrich pioneered a reusable model for creating new sites that includes a replicable workflow for team collaboration and a project management system for news production. The web
template for both sites prioritizes web usability and user experience.

“The actual website template is one that we’re reusing,” Friedrich said. “Then we’re also reusing our processes. Then we’re also reusing our journalism training materials. All of that can be used for any new website that we decide to branch off with.”

She was also systematic in building an industrial-engineering process for the content production –documenting team workflows, developing editing checklists, compiling writing worksheets, creating ethics guidelines, mapping marketing goals, and pursuing process improvement.

“If you have an industrial-engineering process, it’s almost like you can visualize the product going through the factory,” Friedrich said. “You have different things happen to it at different workstations. It moves along. The news goes here. The news goes there. The story idea comes in here. The story idea comes out there. There’s kind of a machine-shop aspect to how this is all put together.”

Friedrich stays informed about online media techniques through her role as a local co-organizer for Online News Association Western New England. Also, to learn from experienced editors about staff management, Friedrich participated in a training at the American Society of News Editors Emerging Leaders Institute in Chicago in 2016. This program helps news editors from underrepresented groups advance in their careers.

Despite these reliable workflows and team structures, any news editor has to deal with their share of good old-fashioned newsroom unpredictability and manage a full inbox.

“As editor of these sites, I’m continually catching new ideas and sending them here and there. So there’s an aspect that’s like being a dispatcher for a taxi company where you will have a call come in and say ‘OK, this taxi’s here and now you need to send it there,’” Friedrich said. She dispatched taxis in the evening during her second year of college.

Friedrich said a process-focused approach can pay off from a marketing perspective too, helping you to track the performance of your content. She put a shared spreadsheet in place where the team tracks when pieces get a signal boost or show high performance. She also watches newsletter, article and report performance using various online tools. Every week, she observes coverage that similar publications are doing. She also tracks attendance at the projects’ webinars and events.

Friedrich said these audience-behavior analytics are a form of feedback on your news product.

“You have to be attuned to your audience in order to see whether your process actually is working because if you don’t have your analytics data in hand, you don’t know if your process is working or not,” Friedrich said, explaining that companies who manufacture products use product feedback to retool their engineering processes.

Friedrich offered some recommendations for other editors who want to be process-efficient as they create startup news outlets:

• Start with a manageable and small number of verticals. You can expand to others later.
• Be realistic about assignments. Assess the amount of time it takes to do them right. Figure out manageable goals. Commit to your goals in a time-efficient way.
• Start with a manageable volume of content – and don’t forget to budget time to promote it. “If you’re producing stuff
that’s really good, and you’re letting people know about it enough, you don’t have to produce a ton of content to have a positive splash.”