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Telling App

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Author

Katcher, Beatrice

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An illustration featuring a teal speech bubble containing a purple and orange notebook, a yellow pencil, and a yellow and black camera. A smaller orange speech bubble is partially visible behind it.

Telling

Telling App

Beatrice Katcher

Abstract

One of the biggest challenges the journalism industry faces is reaching and engaging young people. Telling App is a mobile application for teens that consists of games, local plus global news feeds and a mobile toolkit for self-publishing journalism articles.

Katcher received a 2014 AP-Google Journalism and Technology Scholarship to develop the HTML5 hybrid application. The project can be seen online at TellingApp.com.

Motivation

Growing up I often revisited the past with my grandfather via family photos. We regularly read the newspaper together and at around age seven, I interviewed him for my aunt's cable access television show. These experiences contributed to my love of journalism. Storytelling is a key component of who we are as humans, because stories contribute to our understanding of the world around us [1].

One of the biggest challenges the journalism industry faces is getting young people interested in news and storytelling. Students who enjoy reading the paper are "much more likely to develop the newspaper reading habit as adults" [2]. Yet, teenagers said newspapers are for "middle-aged and old people," that the paper is not relevant to their lives and that reading papers is too much like work. They don't like stories written by professional journalists because these show inaccurate images of teens, according to one large survey [2]. They want stories written by and for teens; and they want them on their device of choice – the cellphone.

A rapidly growing number of children between ages eight and eighteen have access to smartphones or “feature phones” with capabilities such as media players and cameras [3]. “Telling App” is a mobile application that teaches children the value of journalism by presenting news in a visual, interactive and engrossing way. This application will encourage engagement and teach newsgathering at an early age. It aims to show there is value in journalism by placing the power in youth’s hands.

Current Landscape

While youth-created news and media programs currently exist, there is a dearth of mobile platforms geared toward news creation by youth. The New York Times’ “The Learning Network” lets teachers integrate New York Times content into their curricula at school. Web sites like ChannelOne.com, YouthJournalism.org, TimeForKids.com and Magazines.Scholastic.com, don’t have a mobile presence and make the path to publishing difficult. For example, to become a “Kid Reporter” for TimeForKids.com, an interested child has to enter an online contest. In this situation it is unlikely youth will be able to self-publish stories. Also, the site content does not seem like it’s written for and by youth.

A mobile application that served as inspiration and a template for Telling App is StoryMaker. StoryMaker is an Android application that guides users through the story creation process with lessons. Users can create video, audio or photo stories. They are then able to share the stories across their favorite platforms. One key difference between Telling App and StoryMaker is that Telling App is geared toward youth and StoryMaker is not. Therefore, text elements in StoryMaker are quite verbose and not

easily understood by a youth audience. Telling App's aim is to simplify journalism lessons to make the process more understandable.

Design Principles

The theories and principles that influence Telling App's design are constructionist learning, and three crucial predictors of literacy (Decontextualized language/learning, metalinguistic awareness and especially collaboration).

Educator Seymour Papert's theory of "constructionism" asserts learning is an active process where people construct knowledge from their own experiences. They create ideas instead of receiving them. People can effectively construct new comprehension when they are engaged in making something meaningful [6].

Telling App's goal is to immerse users in journalism-based activities to engage learning while constructing a public entity [4]. The young users who create their own stories using journalistic tools can build an "increasingly rich implicit understanding of the world in which they use the tools and of the tools themselves... Learning and acting are interestingly indistinct, learning being a continuous, life-long process resulting from acting in situations" [5]. By constructing stories related to their communities, youth journalists are able to learn about the world around them through exploration.

Many emergent literacy skills are learned through language play and via storytelling. Telling App aims to support literacy skills and uses three crucial predictors of literacy: decontextualized language/learning, metalinguistic awareness and collaboration. Decontextualized language is language removed from its original context. The "who, what, when, where, why and how" element of journalism is designed to answer

questions for readers who have no prior experience with stories. Meaning is then conveyed with explicit details.

Metalinguistic awareness is the power to focus and reflect on the “nature, structure, and function of language” [7]. Children start acquiring metalinguistic skills around the age of four. Metalinguistic awareness can be massaged through the choice of syntax, vocabulary and dialogue structure [8].

Collaboration is a catalyst for innovation in learning. Creativity is social and when two peers collaborate, they are able to appropriate the perspective of the other, which allows for self-actualization through that other perspective. Researcher Justine Cassell emphasizes the role of peers in literacy. Cassell claims that retelling a portion of a story originally told by one’s peer allows both peers to gain a new understanding of the meaning of their words [7]. The concept of another person as an audience matures through interaction with peers. While some news publications cater to teens, adults should not completely dictate the issues important to teens.

Design

Telling App delivers news using a visual centric and mobile-friendly platform on which text can be combined with photos, videos, illustrations, animations and infographics - the kinds of visual content that has made services like Instagram and SnapChat so popular with kids. News feed categories include sports, business, politics, technology and arts plus entertainment.

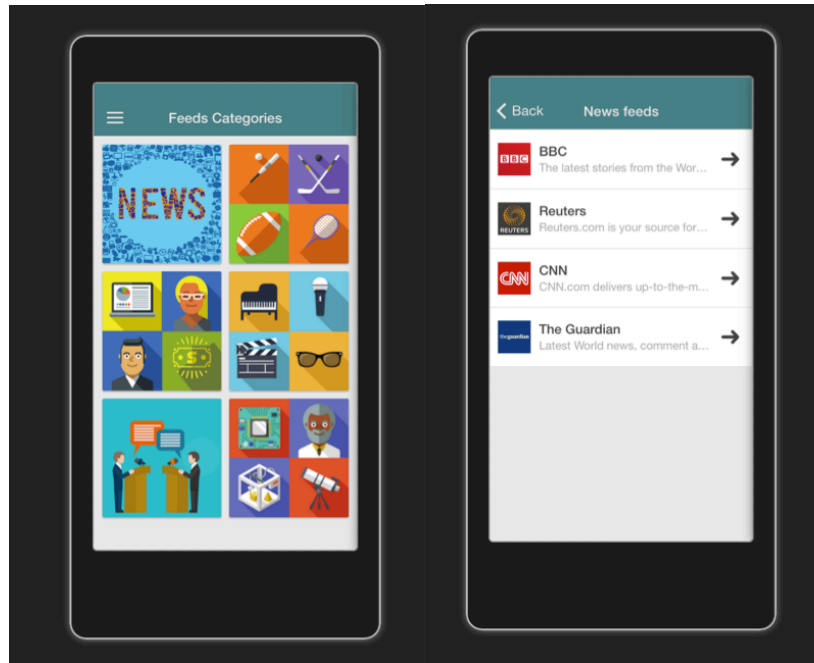


Figure 1: Feed Categories and News Feed Screens

The app contains simple news games and quizzes optimized for cellphones to determine and improve reading levels, using the interactive media forms and mobile devices that youth flock to. They are able to earn virtual badges plus points, motivating them to return to compete with their peers.

The first two games in Telling App's game section are the "Inverted Pyramid" and "Opinion or News Article." The Inverted Pyramid style of writing generally begins with the main points of a story and adds more details as the story progresses. The "Inverted Pyramid" game presents users with elements from a news story and the end-goal is to organize the events in order of importance. The "Opinion or News Article" game teaches users the difference between news and opinion by giving the option to swipe-left if the article presented is an opinion and to swipe-right if the article presented is an unbiased news piece.

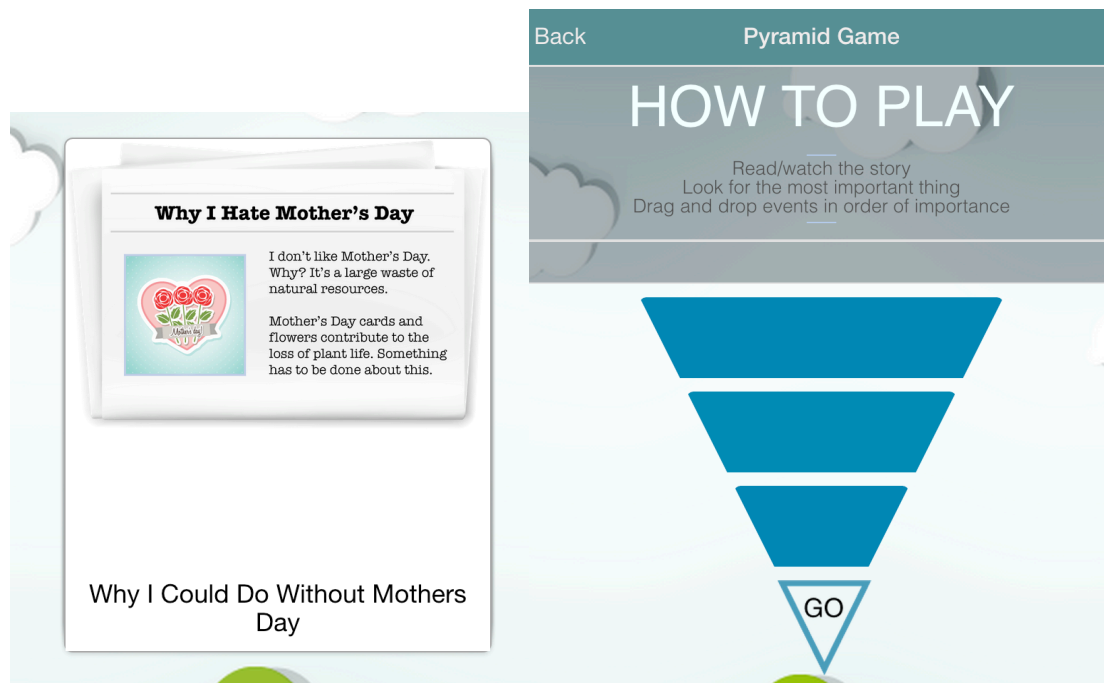


Figure 2: "Opinion or News" and "Inverted Pyramid" games

While this first aspect of the app will help kids learn about news stories, a second component will help them shape news by having a newsroom in their pocket they can use to report the news of their world. This application uses the device's camera for photo stories; YouTube clips can be embedded for b-roll and a notepad for note taking. Audio can also be uploaded to the app. The users will thus have a mobile toolkit they can use to cover breaking news in their neighborhoods. The interface for this application also will allow viewers to vote on featured content, rewarding the more engaged youth-producers. Telling App's reporting screen offers a space for collaboration. In school newsroom settings, student publications or groups can assign photographers, writers or audio producers to cover events. Using a backend supplied by the blogging platform WordPress, the users can create stories using the assets collected on their devices.

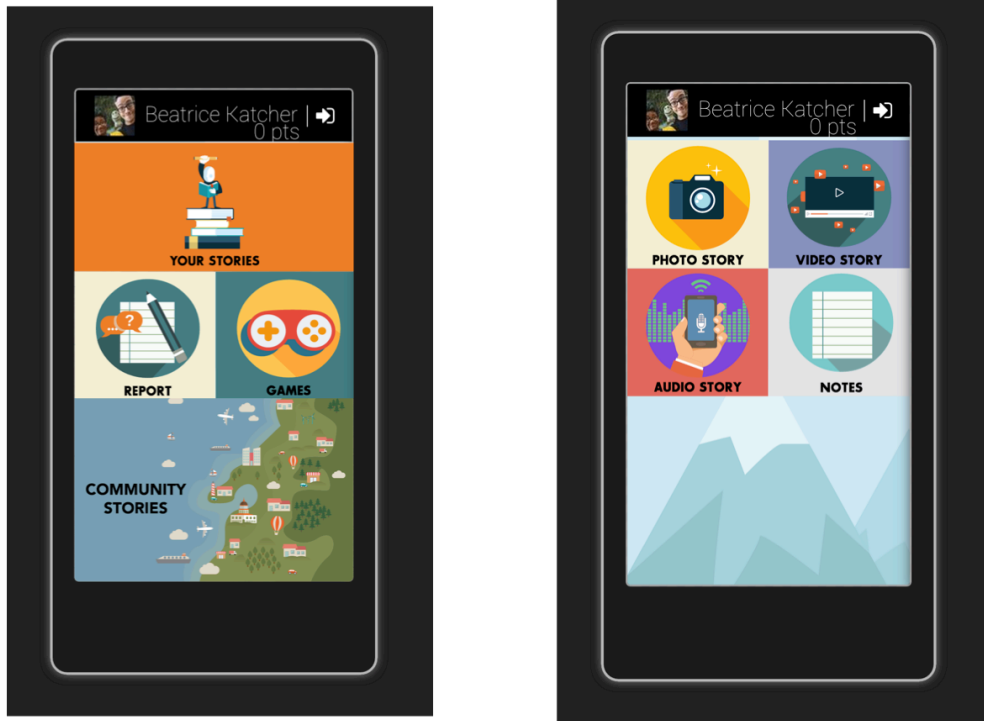


Figure 3: Telling App Main and Reporting screens

Environment

The ideal environment for Telling App is in school and after-school programs. Teachers or mentors can integrate this application into their current events or journalism curricula. This offers a structured environment for young users. Safety and privacy is a major concern behind the design and proposed environment for Telling App.

The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) was enacted by Congress in 1998. COPPA requires the Federal Trade Commission to issue and enforce regulations regarding children's online privacy. The main goal of COPPA is to protect and secure privacy for children under age 13 online and in the mobile sphere. COPPA aims to place parents in control of what information is obtained from their children. Because of this, Telling App will be initially used by adolescents age 13 and up.

An example situation for Telling App would be in an after-school program for teens. In an editorial meeting, newsroom teams are assigned to cover an event. If the occasion were a sporting event, possible roles could include an editor, photographer, writer or audio producer. The photographer will upload images to the server, the writer will upload text and the audio producer will upload audio. The editor can view uploaded assets, compose the story or fact-check text.



Figure 4: Teen journalists at an editorial meeting



Figure 5: Photographer captures images at sporting event



Figure 6: Teen editor views uploaded assets

Evaluation and Future Work

Telling App is an iterative and incremental endeavor. Success or improvements will be evaluated with user testing. Teacher and student feedback regarding workflow will be considered in design refactoring.

Telling App can also be improved upon in Hackathons, gatherings where high school-aged programmers can offer input and create prototypical solutions for the news app. At the hackathons, judges will select the best solutions. Hackathons empower students and allow for the collection of youth interests regarding journalism.

Journalists from publications like The New York Times or Oakland Tribune can also be invited to guest edit work and offer feedback to young producers. Or on a smaller scale, high school mentors can help elementary and middle school students; college-aged mentors can assist high school students with story structure and production.

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky claimed peer interaction provides a “zone of proximal development” within which the performance of a more competent peer can assist a younger peer [7].

After the app is placed in the Google Play or Apple App store, user reviews can serve as a method of evaluation. The app can also serve as a prototype news organization can then customize for use in reaching young people in their markets.

Conclusion

Telling App was designed with the goal of involving young people in the process of journalism by lowering the barrier to news production and democratizing journalism. Telling App's look and feel is modeled after the StoryMaker app and aims to improve upon existing publications aimed toward users between 13-18. The suggested environment and implementation for Telling App is in middle and high school journalism courses or in after school programs. The app can also be used on an individual basis as well.

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