

StoriesFrom

PROJECT	GRANTEE	INNOVATION	GRANT
StoriesFrom	The Tiziano Project	A storytelling platform for combining user-generated content with professional sources	\$200,000

Among the dozens of organizations conducting community journalism projects around the world, many are poorly funded or lack the leadership necessary to sustain a beneficial program. Based on the success of the Tiziano Project's 360° Kurdistan, an immersive multimedia web platform for exploring the cultures of Iraqi Kurdistan, the group won the 2011 Knight News Challenge funding to redesign its proprietary 360° platform into StoriesFrom, a tool that community journalism programs in any local community could replicate. StoriesFrom was intended to give these programs a high-quality and convenient way to display compelling content while pairing the work of community and professional journalists.

THE INNOVATION

For 360° Kurdistan, the Tiziano Project team conducted a three-month citizen journalism training program in Iraq, matching trainees with professional journalist mentors and presenting their work on a single, interactive site. Their efforts on the project were recognized with numerous honors, including the Gracie Award for Outstanding News Website, the SXSW Interactive Award for Best Activism Website, the Community Collaboration Award from the Online News Association, and a Webby Awards honor for the Charitable Organizations/Nonprofit category.

StoriesFrom (initially titled the Tiziano Project 360°) proposed to build on the Tiziano Project's prior work in several ways: it would redevelop the platform to make it replicable by organizations conducting similar workshops around the world, expand the platform to incorporate mobile technology, and create an

interactive world map to serve as a hub for projects developing StoriesFrom sites in their communities. The ultimate goal of the project was to enable local journalists to tell the stories of their communities by improving the ways they could deliver news and information to larger audiences. In the process, they hoped the project would help shape public perceptions of regions that often receive one-sided coverage from Western media outlets.

IMPLEMENTATION

The StoriesFrom team established relationships to pilot the project with several important organizations early in the grant period, among them the National Constitution Center, the National History Museum of Latvia, the Afghan Film Project, Machsava Tova, Media Art Xchanges, and the Fernando Pullum Community Arts Center. Pilot projects involved training students on reporting and media creation techniques, with the goal of empowering them to communicate stories of their communities online. In Latvia, 21 students learned how to report on local civic engagement. In Afghanistan, students were taught how to report on key community themes. On the San Carlos Indian Reservation in Arizona, five Tiziano Project mentors instructed 25 students in photography and multimedia creation skills.

At the same time, StoriesFrom developers were constructing the web platform that formed the cornerstone of their proposal. The StoriesFrom beta site (www.storiesfrom.us) launched on July 7, 2012, two months ahead of the team's original schedule. The timeline was accelerated after the team received an invitation to present StoriesFrom at the Dokufest International Film Festival in mid-July 2012. The new site was fully redesigned for HTML5 and optimized for the

iPad. Initial content consisted mainly of student work from the six pilot projects, along with the planned interactive map populated by the projects and curated tweets from around the world.

Despite its early successes forming partnerships and meeting its launch goals, the StoriesFrom team faced challenges throughout the development process that only grew in magnitude after the site was launched. One large problem was with the structure of the team itself. Prior to winning the Knight News Challenge, Tiziano Project team members were all motivated volunteers. When the Knight Foundation funding came through, it was used to budget for one full-time project manager and part-time compensation for other team members, which had the unintended effect of demotivating formerly enthusiastic contributors while not providing enough of a financial incentive for them to fully commit to the project. Additionally, the part-time team model meant that crucial project roles, such as business development, were only being carried out half the time.

The absence of a full-time business development employee took a significant toll on the long-term viability of StoriesFrom. The pilot partnerships the project had secured, while encouraging, were not designed to be maintained over a long period. The team had taken a “if you build it, they will come” philosophy toward their platform, assuming that the site needed to be launched before

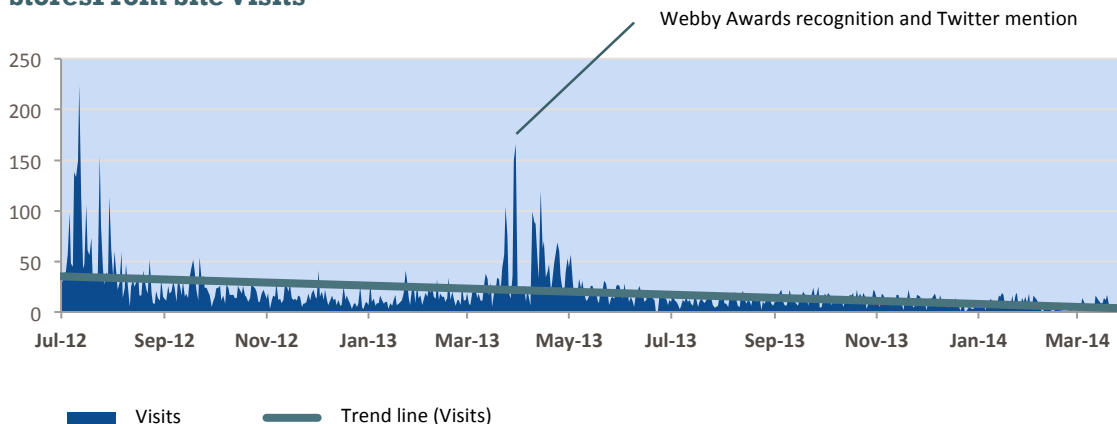
promoting the site and reaching out to more potential partners. Instead, as the StoriesFrom team found itself in need of new partners, it became apparent that attracting interest in the site and additional funding would require significant work beyond release of the site itself—and that they lacked the necessary resources for outreach. As a result, work on StoriesFrom has stopped, with no current plans to revive the project.

REACH AND OUTCOMES

The StoriesFrom site saw modest web traffic at the outset—1,600 unique visitors came to the site in July 2012, the month of its launch. Since that time, however, interest in the site has largely dropped off, with only a few traffic spikes around a few key events—for example, recognition for its Webby Award and a related Twitter mention brought 2,100 new visitors in March and April of 2013.

Perhaps the biggest positive impact of StoriesFrom has come from the students it trained during the pilot phase. In follow-up surveys, pilot participants reported that they still use the skills they acquired during their StoriesFrom workshops, and that the skills have given them access to new job opportunities they wouldn’t have been qualified for otherwise. Their responses suggest that the training models employed by StoriesFrom staff were highly effective, even if the team was unable to sustain those trainings.

StoriesFrom Site Visits



Instead of searching for a new sustainability model for StoriesFrom, which would likely require a \$300,000 to \$400,000 annual budget to reactivate, StoriesFrom creator Jon Vidar is applying his experiences by founding Uncharted Digital, a creative agency for storytelling

ventures. Uncharted Digital's development team is based in Ukraine for cost effectiveness, and its American staff members are all full-time employees. The company is currently working on projects with the Tribeca Film Festival, the Sundance Film Festival, the Ford Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations.