The Web @ Work | Picture Projects
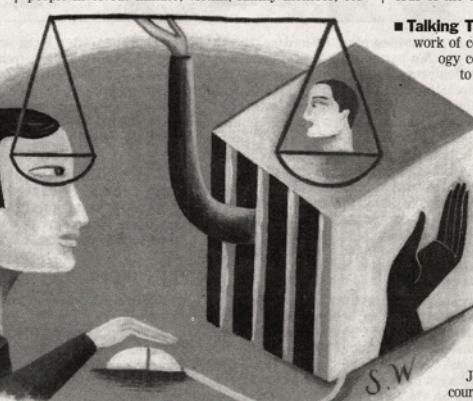By Evelyn Lee
May 21, 2001

A weekly case study

Picture Show: Since 1995, New York City's Picture Projects, a small Web documentary company, had produced separate online works on subjects such as the Vietnam War and the Kurdish people. Eschewing the traditional movie format, their online documentaries aimed to be more collaborative by presenting collections of photographs and stories on a subject, and inviting visitors to add their own stories to the Web site. The documentaries, however, displayed only still photographs, and were all coded with html, which resulted in a presentation that "was kind of flat," says Picture Projects co-founder Sue Johnson.

Movie Show: With www.360degrees.org, their new Website on the American criminal justice system, Ms. Johnson and co-founder Alison Cornyn wanted to not only upgrade their Web presentation, but also broaden their outreach. They wanted to make it easier for people to learn about the criminal justice system, and to be more active in the communities. A much bigger Web site with five distinct sections was needed to fulfill Picture Projects' purposes. Also, producing the content they planned for each section required using technologies they hadn't used on their previous sites. Because of these two factors, the pair teamed up with New York online-production company dotsperinch LLC, and a freelance Web programmer to design the entire Web site Flash, a software program that builds animated sites. The Flash base enabled the group to use technology that creates "moving" panorama photographs in the site's Stories section. Picture Projects received funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and others to help finance the Web site, which cost about $300,000 to start up.

Telling Tales: The Stories focus on a specific case and are told from the different perspectives of the people involved: inmate, victim, family member, correction officer, prosecutor. Visitors can then view the interiors of prison cells, judges' chambers, and courtrooms. Those with Real Audio Player software on their computers can listen to audio clips of the people's stories as they view the rooms, including those of a North Carolina warden who is ambivalent about the prison system; a mother whose two teenage daughters were both incarcerated. Sections such as "Dynamic Data" and "Timeline" were constructed as alternatives to the often tedious statistics pages and technical reports, which comprise most of the criminal justice information on the Web. In "Dynamic Data," users can take interactive quizzes while the photo-illustrated "Timeline" covers the 15 historical eras of the criminal justice system from 601 A.D.

Talking Tales: The duo also tapped into a vast network of contacts, made primarily through criminology conferences and colleagues' connections, to form the discussion groups that participate in the 360degrees's three interactive forums. One takes place between academics, ex-offenders and others several times a year. Forum is a national bulletin board where visitors can post their opinions on more than 30 topics, including prison gangs and "what you can do if you're a parole violator." Visitors also may sign up to be part of the Social Action Network, in which students, ex-offenders, lawmakers, community residents and others discuss social issues and seek solutions to community problems.

Since its launch this past January, 360degress has received about a million hits, mostly from unique visitors, Ms. Johnson said. Several college criminology courses, including those at New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the University of California at Irvine have used the site as part of their curriculum. Educational organizations for ex-offenders, such as the Fortune Society in New York City, also find the site to be a good learning tool for their students., who usually have little prior computer experience. "With our other sites, the audiences were already online," says Ms. Johnson. "With 360degrees, we were trying to reach out to people weren't online before."

Clipping of article printed in the Wall Street Journal on Monday, May 21, 2001