



National Endowment for the Arts

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Report Analyzing an Organization's Visual Media

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Introduction

As internet communication changes the way society consumes information, it also changes the ways in which organizations must provide information to the public. This challenge is perhaps greatest for government entities which, by law, must provide the public with information through some accessible means. However, adding to this challenge is the societal expectation that these organizations venture out into other channels of communication such as social media and multimedia websites to provide information to the public.

It is within these realms that The National Endowment for the Arts appears to struggle to effectively communicate heavy loads of content while remaining consistent to its website. While the organization maintains the same visual branding and visual elements across all of its various channels of communication, its use of text as the primary communication tool makes efforts less effective within all additional channels (with the exception of the NEA blog). The ability to communicate in the dialect of social media and multimedia channels would make the NEA's internet presence more effective over all.

National Endowment for the Arts

Visual Style and Rhetorical Aims

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government (NEA, 2005). The origination of the organization's founding, in addition to its affiliation, appears to be reflected in the overall color scheme, content, and branding across all communication platforms.

Multiple audiences can be identified while investigating various web communication materials developed by the NEA. The organization's primary audiences are donors who bestow funds to the NEA, previous and potential recipients of awards and grants offered by the NEA, and web users who are curious about the NEA and visit the website to learn more about the organization. The NEA addresses these different audiences via mostly verbal communication, although some visual elements are integrated as well.

The NEA Logo

The organization's branding, in terms of visual style, is very basic and conservative. The logo consists of three triangles (red, blue, and yellow) spaced closely together on white background, with the phrase "Art Works." in black font using the typeface Futura Maxi (See Figure 1.1). A slight variation of the logo (See Figure 1.2) also exists and appears on various NEA visual materials.



Figure 1.1: NEA logo , white background, and black text



Whatever variation is used, the logo is present across all NEA web communication materials and represents the organization on connected social media platforms (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and NEA blog). In terms of visual style and branding, this is the most consistent element across the organization's web presence.

Figure 1.2: NEA logo, black background and white text

Despite the current NEA logo's basic and conservative appearance, much thought and deliberation went into developing the graphic, and the creative team responsible for it intelligently integrated text and image together to communicate what the NEA represents. According to the NEA Art Works Identity Guidelines, the three triangles are "designed to represent the bold and memorable white ground letters A and W in all forms of communication." The triangles are geometrically-based shapes, but they also represent the negative space of the letters A and W (See Figure 2). The deliberately-designed logo is particularly salient in this way: not only does it represent a recognizable shape, but it is also a unique way of presenting text and image as an integrated branding tool that is used across all forms of communication.

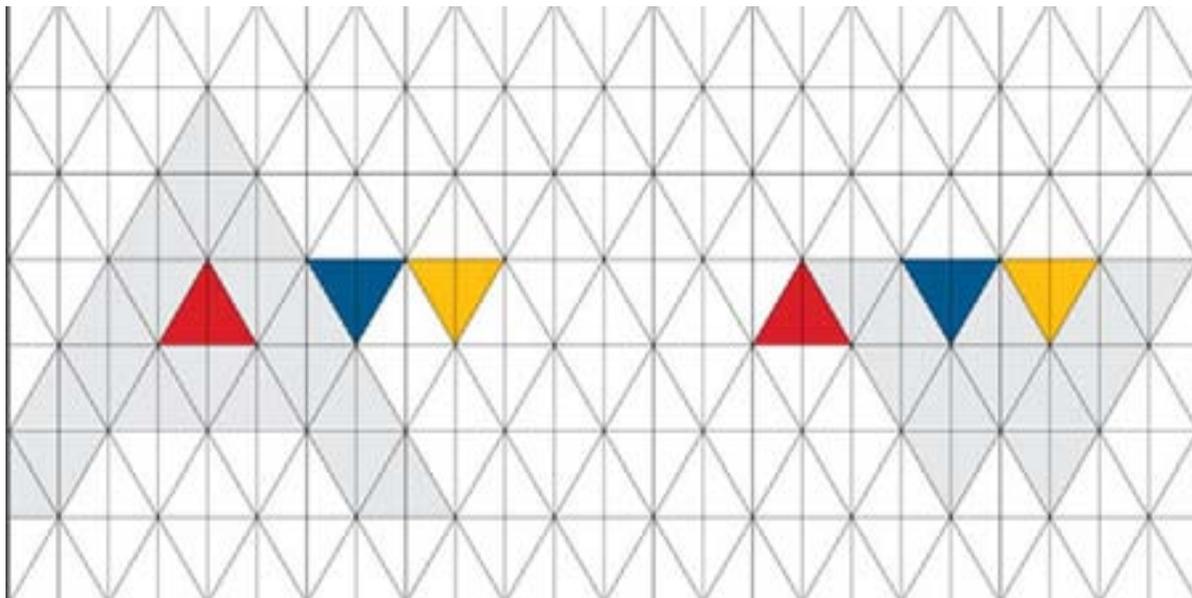


Figure 2: NEA logo with outlined A and W negative space

NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman explains that the logo, as a symbol, is a metaphor for the three purposes of Art Works (NEA, 2009):

Works by Artist

"Art Works" is a noun. They are the books, crafts, dances, designs, drawings, films, installations, music, musicals, paintings, plays, performances, poetry, textiles, and sculptures that are the creations of artists.

Art works on audiences

"Art Works" is a verb. Art works on and within people to change and inspire them; it addresses the need people have to create, to imagine, to aspire to something more.

Art Workers

"Art Works" is a declarative sentence. Art jobs are real jobs that are part of the real economy. Art workers pay taxes, and art contributes to economic growth, neighborhood revitalization, and the livability of American towns and cities.

The designers have developed the logo to communicate these three components in one simple text/image graphic: "The process of recognizing the letters represents bridging the gap between Art Works and the audience" (Why Not Smile, 2010). If applied successfully across the organization's web communication platforms, the organization's audience will recognize the NEA logo and easily associate the channel with the organization.

NEA Website - Multiple Versions

The NEA homepage is the most visually appealing page of the entire website, and appears to have been updated for that purpose. In fact, according to investigations on internet archive WayBack Machine, the homepage has been redesigned several times over the past 13 years (WayBack Machine, 2013); Figure 3 shows an example of what the NEA website looked like before its latest redesign. However, the other pages of the website have been redesigned only once, in 2005, most likely for the purpose of consistency and re-branding. Since then, the homepage has been redesigned once more, but none of the other pages were redesigned along with it - they have remained the same as they appear now.

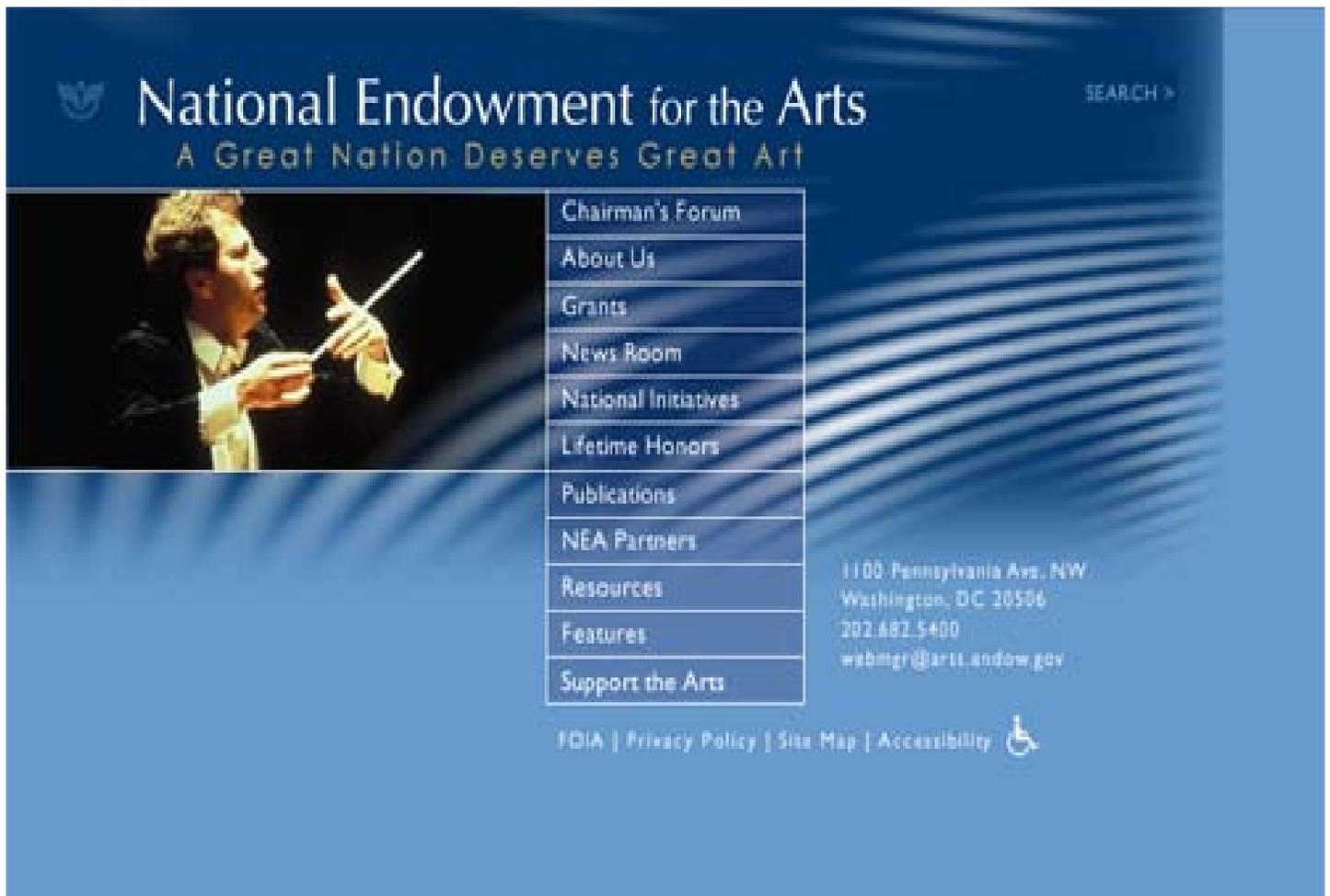


Figure 3: NEA's previous website homepage design

The homepage's multiple redesigns and lack of adaptation to the entire site implies that the organization's engagement efforts rest almost entirely on this one webpage. The organization uses the homepage to visually engage users who visit the website - yet when the user navigates to other pages on the site, little visual appeal exists. Another implication of this choice possibly relates to funding; the NEA is a federally-funded organization which also relies on donations - therefore, given the small pool of steady finances and different congress sectors allocating different funds, it is likely that available finances are unanticipated or unpredictable, and as a result, few finances can be heavily relied upon to fund the redesign of the entire website.

Another interesting discovery encountered while investigating the NEA website through the eyes of WayBack Machine is the logo's redesign. NEA's current logo was developed less than two years ago, at the time of the website's last revamping. At that time, Chairman Landesman announced that the organization was seeking proposals for the new logo to represent the phrase "Art Works," the organization's "guiding mission" (Itzkoff, 2010). Before then, the logo was more conventional - while slight variations existed, only one color was used per appearance (See Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3). The NEA likely redesigned its branding to appear more transparent and approachable, and less institutional. In comparison, the current logo and color scheme are more visually appealing and also carry a deeper meaning for the organization's guiding principle.

Figure 4.1: NEA's previous logo, dark grey



Figure 4.2: NEA's previous logo, black



Figure 4.3: NEA's previous logo, blue



NEA Website - Text vs. Image

Simply put, the NEA website is very text-heavy, with a majority of the content consisting of text. Any images and graphics are used only to complement the textual information, meaning that verbal and visual content are presented differently and both modes are needed in order to understand the key ideas (Schriver, 1997). The overall tone and style of writing on the NEA website is informational and technical - no emotional language is used, nor any particular opinions expressed.

The NEA wishes to represent itself professionally, providing information in a very straight-forward manner, which is likely due to its affiliation with the federal government. Because the website is so text-heavy, the organization assumes that its audience is well-educated and visits the NEA website to retrieve information about the organization, its initiatives and projects, and/or to find relevant resources. In fact, website users who wish to view reports and publications are required to download PDF documents - this process further supports the claim regarding what the NEA assumes about its audience.

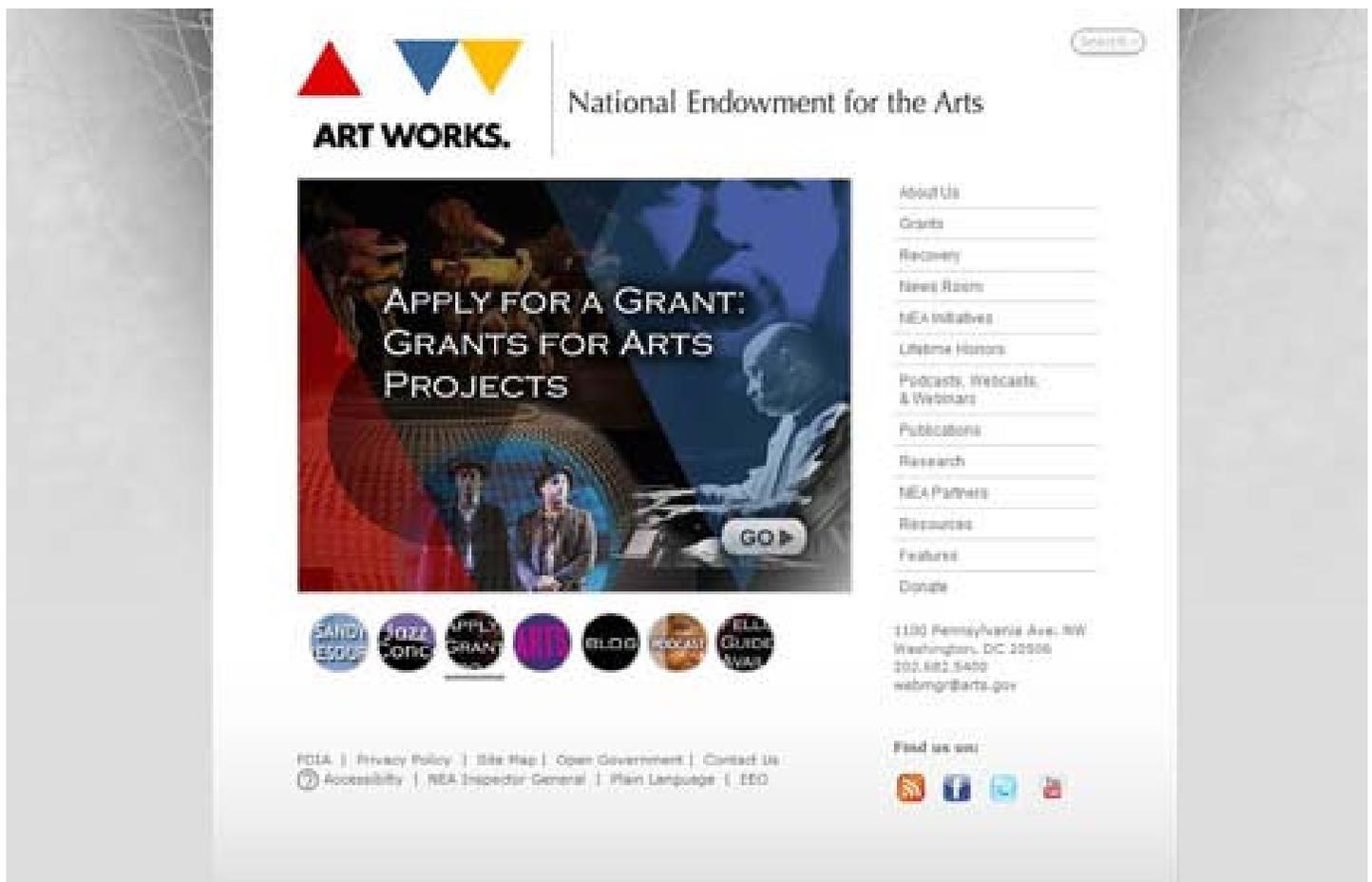


Figure 5.1: NEA website current homepage design

The overall layout of text and image on the NEA website only slightly varies. For example, on the homepage, a slideshow is located in the very middle of the screen and features seven rotating images that represent various part of the entire website (See Figure 5.1 on previous page).



On other pages of the NEA website, such as the “National Initiatives” and “NEA Partners” pages, medium-size icons and project titles are listed on the left side of the page, accompanied by short descriptions to the right (See Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2: NEA “NEA Partners” webpage

On other pages such as “About Us” and “Recovery,” however, there are little to no images at all (See Figure 5.3).

Choices about text/image layout imply that the NEA uses images as a means to visually represent affiliate organizations and projects in place. By doing so, the NEA assumes that visitors will recognize such images and make the connection to its respective text content. While this method is considered good practice, it renders the entire website’s layout slightly inconsistent.



Figure 5.3: NEA “About Us” webpage

Other NEA Communication Platforms - Social Media

While the NEA website is intended to be informative and uses a technical communication style, the organization's social media platforms take a different approach. Each channel - Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the official NEA blog, Art Works - appears to represent different levels of how the NEA adapts its web communication efforts and different forms of online promotion to appear much more versatile, transparent, and has the potential to reach and appeal to not only its identifiable audiences, but other audience types found on these extended channels. Furthermore, even though these social media channels contain a fixed template that the organization must adhere to, there is still much opportunity for the NEA to represent its brand visually.

The NEA Facebook page, for example, reaches not only previously identified audiences, but also NEA fans who are interested in sponsored events, community outreach, and works funded by the organization. This platform still provides information in the "About" section that remains consistent to the NEA website - in fact, the "General Information" section features regulations for those who wish to post comments on the page. However, updates and posts displayed on the page's feed feature emotional language, is spoken in first-person, and incorporates much more imagery into its content (NEA Facebook Page, 2008). Figure 6 demonstrates the current "Timeline" of the NEA Facebook Page. This approach represents what could be considered a "baby step" into developing a social media presence.



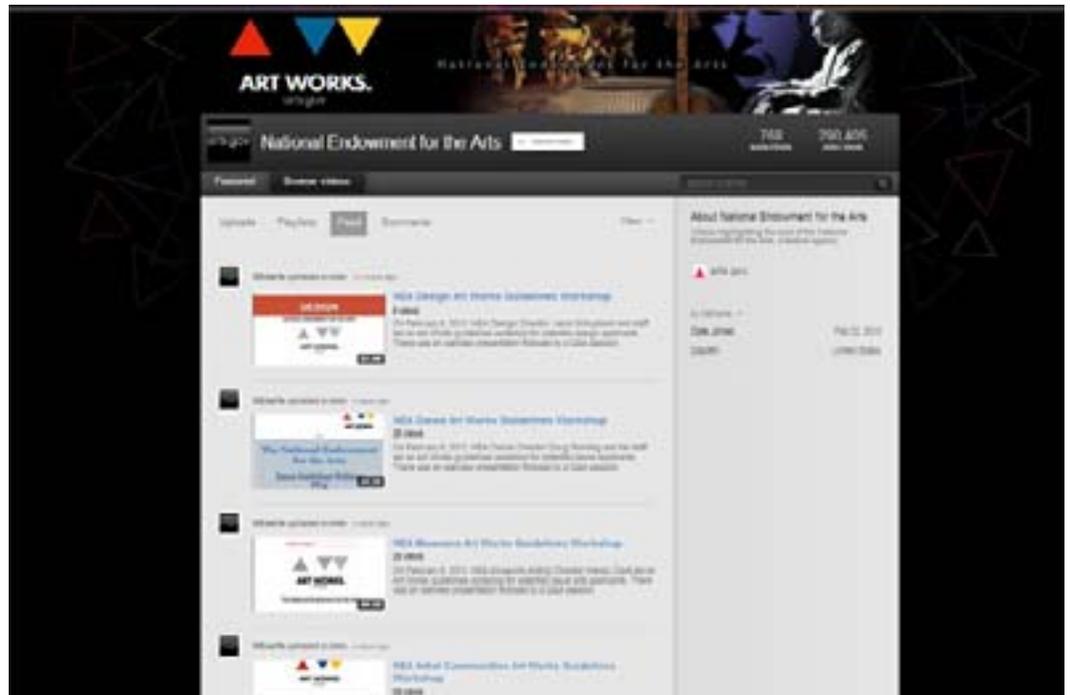
Figure 6: NEA Facebook Page Timeline

The NEA Twitter page, on the other hand, allows for more interesting investigation. The NEA Twitter page reaches an audience that consists of fans of the NEA's mission and community outreach, and patrons of the arts in general. Because Twitter users are restricted to 140 characters per post/update (NEA Twitter Page, 2010), the NEA must alter its current web communication style (i.e. presenting text-heavy content) to coincide with the social media channel's restrictions and apply to existing audiences. As a result, the NEA is forced to "step outside of its comfort zone" to adapt to this form of mass communication and social media marketing.

Other NEA Communication Platforms - Social Media

Figure 7: NEA YouTube Channel Main Page

The NEA YouTube channel appears to take a giant leap from other social media platforms - however, this is most likely the result of the nature of the channel's content. YouTube's content consists primarily of videos and thumbnail images of those videos (See Figure 7), implying that NEA's YouTube audience consists of visually-engaged members, aficionados of audio-visual performances, and those who value multimedia as a way to obtain information.



Hence, the NEA uses this platform as a means to share performances, events, and workshops (NEA YouTube Channel, 2010). However, considering all of the videos are longer than 30 minutes, the NEA assumes that viewers will be patient enough to watch entire videos, which can potentially hinder mass communication efforts via this platform if such assumptions are incorrect.



Finally, the official NEA blog, Art Works, appears to be the most approachable and transparent form of communication across the organization's entire online presence. Through this platform, the NEA is able to reach an audience that consists of those who are interested in opinions of industry experts, current art-related issues, and events planned or sponsored by the NEA. While the content consists of mostly text and complementary images, the language used is much more engaging, regardless of the fact that posts are published by several different contributors (Art Works, 2013). Nevertheless, Art Works still manages to share information in manner that, when compared to the organization's website, is more enjoyable and easier for the reader to consume (See Figure 8).

Figure 8: Art Works (NEA Blog) Homepage

Other NEA Communication Platforms - Magazine/Print

NEA Arts is the organization's quarterly magazine and is available as a PDF download or online view (NEA Arts, 2012). While the NEA has distributed many publications since its founding, the print version of the magazine could be considered the most visually appealing and intelligently designed communication piece distributed by the NEA. Because the publication is in the form of a magazine, the balance of text and image appears more manageable for reader consumption. Figure 9 features a sample page from the third quarter issue of 2012.



Figure 9: NEA Arts quarterly magazine sample page

The organization uses NEA Arts as a mass communication material of leisurely reading, which provides further evidence about what the NEA assumes about its website-specific audience - it consists of people who are well-educated and visit the NEA website to retrieve information about the organization, its initiatives and projects, and/or to find relevant resources. The NEA takes advantage of this mass communication piece - entertainment in the form of a magazine - by reaching its audiences from an approach other than its website and social media channels.

National Endowment for the Arts

Our Claim

Because the NEA website aims to serve several different constituencies, the NEA website is not able to easily appeal to all of its identifiable audiences. However, the organization's affiliated social media channels (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and NEA Arts) enable the NEA to craft content that is more suited to each of those constituencies and more robustly execute its mission statement. Despite the different target audiences, visual organization remains consistent throughout all forms of web communication (i.e. the header photo displayed across pages on the website is also used as cover photos on both Facebook and YouTube channels). However, each of these channels also presents unique challenges for the NEA's production of text and image communication.

Facebook

The NEA Facebook page serves two purposes. First, it is a way for people to connect with the NEA on a level that is not provided on the NEA website: page visitors can interact with the NEA via messages, wall posts, and comments. However, it also provides a means for the NEA to showcase or announce award recipients to a wider audience, which is not readily apparent on the website's homepage. For example, while browsing the NEA Facebook page, one might find an embedded YouTube video of an interview with an artist who received a grant from the NEA. For someone who is only interested in the works funded by the NEA, as well as other NEA audiences found on Facebook, this channel is highly effective in this approach.

Facebook also serves the purpose of fulfilling two tenets of the NEA mission: it promotes works by artists and also shows art workers in action via interviews and profiles. The Facebook page allows for additional context in which audience members might examine the artists supported by the NEA. Not only can consumers see the work that is being produced by artists, but they can watch interviews, and see the artists in action. Rather than designate text as the primary source of information, the NEA Facebook page uses video and image as the primary means of conveying information, with text used to complement the visual elements. Because this format places the "final product" at the forefront of the communication on this channel, it is a direct opposite of the communication method used on the NEA website.

One of the drawbacks of the Facebook format is that it does not allow for a large amount of customization. While this “fixed template” does allow the NEA to prominently feature image and video, which facilitates the dissemination of its artists work, the format does not allow the NEA to perform other basic functions found on its homepage. For example, the NEA website homepage features a link to their “Donate” page for those who might wish to financially contribute to the organization, but similar navigation is not easily created on Facebook (See Figure 10).

Additionally, the image and minimal text format of Facebook pages render the task of accessing large amounts of information (i.e. allocation of funds, grant recipients, etc.) more difficult when compared to the NEA website. Rather, one must dig through several links in order to quickly access this information, for which users will be navigated to the NEA website anyway. While more simple to navigate, the use of large visual elements on the Facebook page causes some of the more nuanced elements of the NEA page to be lost or overlooked.



Figure 10: NEA Facebook Page

When looking at the communicative effectiveness of the NEA Facebook page, there are additional items to note. Despite the opportunities for interaction between the NEA and its audiences, little interaction actually exists or is at least not entirely obvious. The absence of interaction is likely due to the NEA's established set of rigorous guidelines for those who wish to post to the page's wall (See Figure 11).



Figure 11: NEA Facebook Page “About” section

This observation warrants mention because while the NEA funds expression, it is asking visitors to adhere to a set of regulations in order to post to their wall, which can potentially cause confusion about the organization's perceived communication efforts. Additionally, because the NEA is a government agency, one might sense that the organization would champion expression of any kind on their Facebook page - the established set of posting guidelines contradicts this belief.

YouTube

Whereas the NEA Facebook page uses video and image as the primary means of conveying information, with text used to complement the visual elements, the NEA YouTube channel is in extreme contrast. As mentioned before, this multimedial form of communication serves audiences other than those identifiable on the NEA website, such as visually-engaged members, aficionados of audio-visual performances, and those who value multimedia as a way to obtain information. With little more than the Arts.gov branding on it, the NEA's mission and purpose is not obvious for these audience members. YouTube users who visit the NEA channel are greeted only by the recognizable visual branding that exists across all channels of communication (See Figure 12). Additionally, there is a very small, obscure portion of text on the main page that explains the purpose of the NEA YouTube channel, further implying that YouTube audiences do not value heavy-text content to retrieve information.

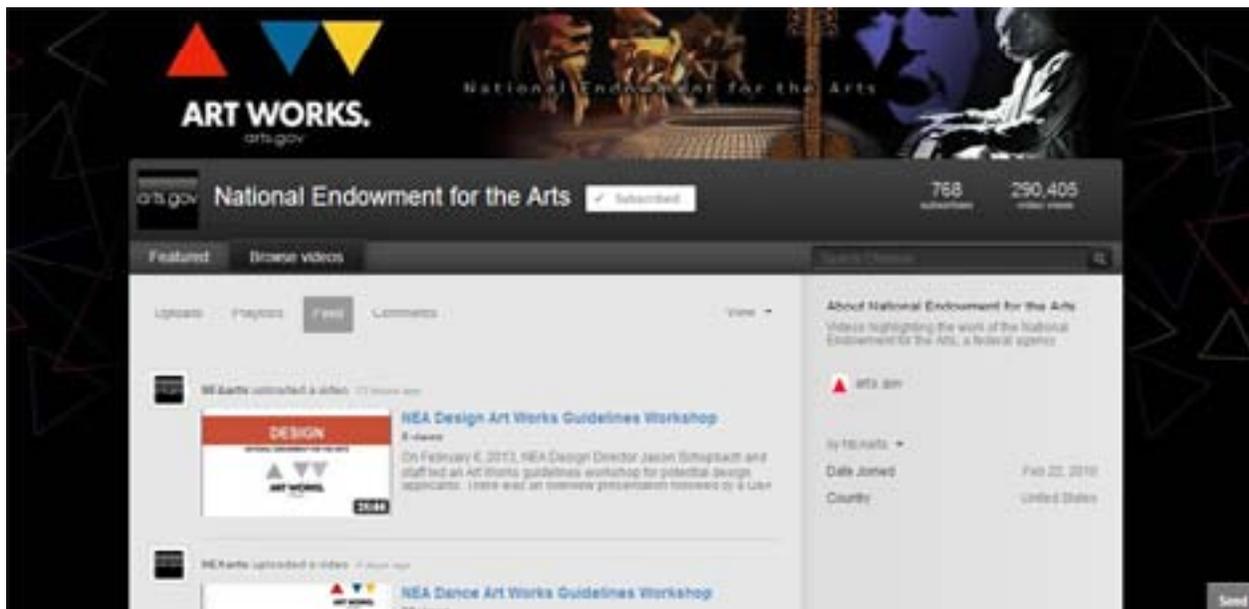


Figure 12: NEA YouTube Channel

The NEA YouTube channel serves only to offer visitors the organization's "final product," and does not appear to educate audiences about its mission or various services the NEA provides to artists, art fans, and the nation. Of all the channels of communication, the YouTube channel does not allow visitors to learn much about the organization. Additionally, those who consume the NEA content as presented through YouTube must be willing to sit through videos which run up to 45 minutes in length. While the channel serves to highlight the artists funded by the NEA, it does little else in terms of web communication. Rather than make any sort of appeal, or other effort to provide users with additional resources, the YouTube channel simply appears to be one of many multimedia channels.

While some might argue that the NEA YouTube channel exists in its format because of the nature of the “fixed template” of this platform, it also allows the NEA to entice visitors to further explore the NEA, as opposed to simply providing a channel for the organization’s output. The organization, order, and format of videos greatly affect the visitor experience; if a playlist with a “welcome” or “introduction” video appeared first, it might help to better engage visitors who are not familiar with the NEA, and better align communication with the rhetorical aims of other social media channels.

YouTube is unique in that it allows an organization to upload a great amount of media to its channel and allows users to subscribe to various channels within their media library. A new visitor to the NEA YouTube channel might become acquainted via the welcome video, whereas a seasoned visitor might be able to hone in on the content which interests them most. This approach might serve even more audiences than the NEA Facebook page, as it allows the user to shape their experience. However, at the moment, the NEA YouTube channel serves only the most seasoned and well-versed user. The flawed execution of content strategy on this platform is likely due to the fact that the NEA values text-heavy content - the organization has yet to master other forms of web communication i.e. multimedia, and therefore fails to strategically promote its mission and offerings via this channel.

Conclusion

While the NEA has fairly robust content within the various areas of its communication channels, there is little which binds the channels together other than branding. The NEA's focus on text as its primary means of communication is ineffective across all channels and does not effectively communicate the message of objectives of the NEA in all realms. Because visitors may explore the NEA channels from any number of sources, it is important that they either drive visitors to the website homepage to better understand their mission and their objectives, or provide sufficient information about the NEA to visitors in a way that is format appropriate. Certainly the incredible amount of information on the NEA website would not fit and is not appropriate for the other communication channels - however, if produced appropriately, the objectives of the NEA will better align across all channels.

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