Q&A with Jennifer Stancil
Interviewed by Joelle Seligson

Transmedia, or storytelling across multiple platforms, is the biggest trend in media today, according to Jennifer Stancil—which would make her a trendsetter. Before signing on as executive director of education at the Pittsburgh public television station WQED in 2010, Stancil had already experimented with an array of media over nearly 15 years in the museum field, including five years as executive director of the Girls, Math & Science Partnership at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Science Center. Her goal: to engage youth, especially girls, with science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Here, Stancil discusses media’s fast-paced path and how museums and science centers can keep up to speed.

So Jen, when you came aboard at WQED in 2010, you were charged with instating a new vision and direction for the station’s 50 years of educational work. How have you changed the station’s educational path in the last two years?

Certainly it is a path that I hope I’ve changed in two years but that we’re also hopeful to change over the coming years. I don’t think it’s any surprise that public media in general or broadcasters, as you’re thinking of them, in general are challenged today and have opportunities today that they did not have before. It’s important to know that, in our media landscape, kids that are 8 to 18 are consuming 10 3/4 hours of media a day, whether it be audio, whether it be video, whether it be television, etc. So kids are really saturated in this media climate. And my calling was to try to figure out how WQED as a broadcaster, as a public media station, and with a tremendous legacy in the community could begin to help parents, teachers, and kids speak in the language of that new media landscape.

And so for us we’ve developed a platform, a strategy called “iQ: smart media,” and iQ: smart media is really based around one mission statement if you will, and that is to change the way media is used for education. So when we see things like Khan Academy, we see that as revolutionary. We’re trying to do similar things at WQED through gaming, through using our air and radio and television and online signals in completely different ways and really integrating the wonderful content that we get from PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] deeply in local at-risk communities.

From our vantage point, I think readers are very interested in the work you are doing and have done in motivating youth, especially girls, to pursue STEM education. I know you yourself graduated with a degree in biological science, is that right?

Yes, that’s true.

So when you were a teen, what motivated you to pursue a degree in STEM, and was media influential on you?

That’s a great question, a super question. OK, so first of all, what motivated me. I think if I answered the question honestly, it isn’t necessarily what motivated me, which happened earlier in middle school, but what didn’t dissuade me. So I was certainly very compelled by a personal experience that I had had and wanted to become a doctor after that point in middle school, and so I think that there was that but I also believe that I wasn’t dissuaded at all especially through high school and through college when it wasn’t the place for girls to
be—that never came across to me in the way that my professors or my teachers were
reaching out to me and encouraging me. So even though my peers, there was a network of
peers that that was a little bit wonky for, that that didn’t quite maybe make sense, there
was a lot of help because people didn’t see it as odd for whatever reason.

And I commonly cite and I think this is so fun—I commonly talk about my high school in
Nebraska, it was a public high school, a great public high school, and the value of that
culture was being smart. So our prom queen was an engineer and still is today. And so it’s
really great to see a high school that values smart no matter what your gender, and equips
you to do all kinds of things in science and media. Many of us have gone on to do a lot of
public work, as you know, 15 years in museums. I think it’s really interesting that I not only
was motivated but I was not dissuaded.

The second question, did media influence me? Massively. I haven’t been asked that question
before, but massively. When I talk about PBS specifically, I talk about what was helpful to
me, I talk a lot about the show 3-2-1 Contact, which was a PBS show and it was sort of all
about mysteries and science and, oh! I was just—it just held my attention. And so I think
that that combined with the fact that I loved math and I loved things like animal behavior,
which was my later work in graduate school—it was really, really something that I felt really
compelled to do. But I also had in-person experiences that were really valuable, and those
in-person experiences in some cases were at museums and in some cases were at
organizations, nonprofit organizations that were engaged in healthcare in some way.

I say that because right now the trend—I think the biggest trend in media today is around
transmedia. Transmedia is suggesting that there’s a mother narrative that we all buy into
and that we can access that content from different sources, whether it be television or an
in-person experience or a conference or a radio show or—it’s something that happens to us,
and so that we’re able to actually take our experiences with media off the broadcast
framework and into our lives in a pretty transparent way.

You just went into what was going to be my next question, which is how that
traditional broadcast media like 3-2-1 Contact can sort of be bolstered by new
media today.

Well I think I can give you some really interesting examples. I think one of the most
interesting is our project with the Pittsburgh Zoo and PPG Aquarium. The Pittsburgh Zoo has
worked with us because we had a television show called Wild Kratts, which is extremely
popular right now. It’s a new show, it’s 18 months into its run, and it’s for specifically 6- to
10-year-olds. It’s all about animals. And so what we wanted to do was, we wanted to use
the clips from that show and actually take them back and put them into the formal science
education place where they could be most useful. Because it’s a disconnect, right? You’re
watching the television show and you have this, you get this knowledge about cheetahs or
crocodiles or polar bears. But it’s not actually happening with you at the time, and I think
that’s the power of media: It’s portable.

So what we’ve done is we have instead made something called iQZoo.org, and iQZoo.org is
an online and a mobile platform, the experiences are different mobile-ly and online, and
when you go to our zoo in Pittsburgh you are able to look at a set of animals in the
savannah, in the polar icecaps, and a set of forest monkeys, so 15 animals total. And
there’s a QR code and signage there, and then you can actually have on your mobile phone,
after scanning the QR code, you’ll be able to actually get the PBS video that explains more
about that crocodile or more about that walrus that you’re seeing. And what we’ve been
fortunate enough to do is actually get research from that project, so that it’s not just that
kids are using cell phones in a different way than they have before, it's not just that our project meets those needs for young children in the 6-7-8-9-10 range to actually use a phone in a way that gets information across to them, but actually that they retain more when they do so. So best practices in media has to do with, “Will you learn more?” And so we went from being on the air with 3-2-1 Contact to being with you at all times. And that is a massive change that not only WQED has to negotiate but every public media station in the nation has to negotiate. And that’s what’s exciting about the work here, is to pioneer that path.

What about for science centers and museums that are hoping to go down that path and incorporate more of a full media experience? How would you recommend they go about that, especially with funds being the way they are today?

Well, I think one of the other examples of how inventive partnerships work—and it is really about partnerships, what kind of value does a science center bring or a natural history museum bring to the table that a media company can complement and augment? So it’s typical that we use the characters or the show to leap off the screen and into these museums.

Two examples. One at the Carnegie Science Center: When I worked there we were able to engage middle school girls with a show called Design Squad. And Design Squad is a reality TV show for high schoolers that are interested in engineering. And we brought that cast as if they were rock stars—which they were—to a live event where we did all kinds of fun engineering challenges, and we had 5,000 people that weekend. That’s a big draw. So you use the television to leap off as your marketing point to get people to come into the museum and experience it in live time.

Second example, a similar example with the Carnegie Museum of Natural History here: We had a specialty event for members and then another event for the general public where we actually not only got to meet Buddy the Dinosaur from Dinosaur Train, but we got to see something that you couldn’t see on the air. Our public media stations are given advanced screening rights to particular shows, and so one of the things that we’ve done is screen a television show that hasn’t been aired yet as a premiere, and then had kids be in the situation, in this case the natural history museum, where they could explore the Stegosaurus and the Pteranodon, etc., not only as a jumping-off point with Dinosaur Train, this wonderful Jim Henson production that PBS does, but also the magnificent and world-class collection that Carnegie Museum of Natural History has. They did the content in terms of putting together what would work in their museum. We brought the content in terms of Dinosaur Train and something new and something that was just going to be on television as well as a character. And we felt that partnership worked beautifully.

We’ve also done that with not institutions but groups. We had a group of girls named the Girls of Steel Robotics, and of course they’re the girls’ FIRST Robotics team here, associated with CMU [Carnegie Mellon University] and our girls’ school here, and when there were robotics things on the air, I used it as a jumping-off point for people to go to their personal websites to see what they were doing. The show SciGirls did a robotics show and I used it as a jumping-off point to direct girls not only back to the SciGirls show but to the real girls that were doing things on a day-to-day basis with robotics and doing competitions. So it doesn’t have to be just an institution: Media can work with smaller groups to make gigantic impact.
With the amount of pioneering you're already doing today, what are you envisioning for the next five or 10 or 50 years with the rate that both media and today's youth are evolving?

Well, I think we have a lot of plans in that direction. We have two major, major initiatives underway right now. One is iQ: smart parent, which allows us to help parents in this media-rich landscape understand how to connect and create opportunities with their child around media that are educational. It's often that we sort of push the child to an app, etc., and don't engage with them, but we want to equip parents. In the same way that we might give parenting tips to parents about how their kids make choices, we would give them help around the choices they make with media and how media can be a learning opportunity for their child, and how to pick and select good media for their child. So our parent work is paramount for us.

Secondly we're doing incredible work with teachers across our media footprints and across the state of Pennsylvania, helping for instance Head Starts integrate PBS media into their Head Start space, whether it be at home or in a community center, and actually giving away tens of thousands of dollars worth of free resources and curriculum from major producers like Sesame Street. Because we get these materials, and if we train teachers on them we're able give them these free resources. Thus we build the capacity of teachers to use media in new ways, whether it be in circle time or in an experiment in their classroom or as an audio experience, listening to a song, they're able to actually engage with public media in a way that they haven't to date.

Beyond that, we're looking at some very edgy work in terms of gaming, which PBS is doing wonderful work with gaming in math right now, but we're trying to push that envelope a little bit further. We want to harness our relationships here locally in the community to make new things and to make media work for local participants as well as for anyone that wants to engage with us nationally. So while we made iQZoo as a local project, any PBS station in the nation, any zoo right now today can become an iQZoo, and we've made that available for them. So we'd like to use our creativity and our distribution platforms to really impact millions of people to use educational media in really refreshing and innovative ways.

And beyond zoos, how can science centers and museums in particular use this new media landscape?

I've seen a lot I think being done in the world of Science Cafés, and it makes great sense that people are engaging the community in these deep discussions around things like NOVA or NOVA scienceNOW or The Secret Life of Scientists, or a series about material science for instance. So I think people are getting it from the point of conversation. What happens when conversation happens around your exhibits online and offline, and how are you making that available to your visitors, to the museum visitor, with media in mind? We've long looked at art museums as a nontouch environment and science centers as a high-touch, hands-on environment. What happens when science centers are also a media-rich environment? What happens when you can scan a code and find out more about an exhibit, or log into a system within a museum and see who else is there that's interested in robots just like you are, or interested in the environment just like you are?

How does media create social opportunities for kids, how does it create the same social opportunities that it creates for adults, but just in a lecture format, and how does media actually have permission to be used in your space? I think many people put down their media or use it in a way that isn't educational at a museum. That doesn't have to be the case. We can use—audio tours have been a big staple of traveling exhibits. What happens
when we push that envelope a bunch further? How can we equip museums using apps like Project Noah to encourage citizen science? So I think that we really have to ratchet the conversation in a whole different direction. It’s not just amplifying it, it’s ratcheting it in a different direction. What is the permissible use of media in your museum and how are you facilitating that so that people can have a deeper learning experience and a deeper social experience?

That’s great. It’s a lot of food for thought.