

## Multimedia Standards

<http://www.multimediastandards.org>

**Andrew DeVigal:** I started my career at a small organization and a small newspaper in California called the Contra Costa Times and I think from there...I should go back and talk about my degree and my educational background was in information systems. I was actually a programmer for a while. While I was going through college I was actually a graphic artist at the Contra Costa Times and I really enjoyed the collaboration and the collaborative environment of journalism, and also just the storytelling aspect that ultimately when I got my degree in programming, which was in information systems, I thought I was going to be a programmer for a while.

But once I got my degree and I started working as a programmer, I found out I really didn't like just doing that. I really loved the storytelling aspect of journalism and also the journalism itself. I ended up leaving the industry in information systems and I got an internship at the Chicago Tribune as a staff artist.

And then from there, that's when I really became more of a visual journalist and a graphic journalist. And about a year into my internship, they ended up hiring me full time. So I worked there on the print side for a number of years where ultimately, this was back in 1994-95 when we were just starting to think about launching a website. I was the number three hire for the [chicagotribute.com](http://chicagotribute.com) after working for the print side for a while. So basically I became the original web designer for the website. We started doing more interactive work.

I remember one of my very first interactive projects was on the baby bells, and I used...young people like yourself probably won't remember that before Flash there was a program called Macromedia Director, where you ended up putting up these huge pixel based graphics rather than vector based graphics on director and you could make a swf file out of that. It was an output from Macromedia Director. So I did a package on the Baby Bells and sideling how you can break down the baby bells across the country, and I would actually think that it was probably *the* first interactive graphic on the web. I wish it was still online, but unfortunately as time grew that kind of package sort of disappeared. I might have to dig that up someday. I must have that someplace in my archives.

So, we launched that and I was with the [ChicagoTribune.com](http://ChicagoTribune.com) for a while after the launch and then Knight Ritter/New Media ended up calling me to help sort of lead some of their visual approaches to their more vertical ... so I helped design with some colleagues some of the verticals for Knight Ritter.

I kind of wasn't digging the corporate world too much so I ended up joining the faculty at the Poynter Institute, as a fellow. We did an eye track study that we collaborated with Stanford University. And also, I ran a few seminars regarding

multimedia and also web design across those paths. Eventually, I ended up staying with Poynter for a while, not as a full time faculty, but as a recurring fellow.

Which leads me back to the Bay Area where there was an opportunity to join the faculty of San Francisco State University's journalism program to help lead the charge for multimedia. We ended up doing some pretty groundbreaking packages on the website called Xpress. Once I launched the website called 1000words.org, which pushed some of the boundaries of multimedia stories, and then two years from being tenure, the New York Times called me and was wondering if I wanted to be a part of the change in terms of multimedia storytelling here at the Times. And here I am three years later.

**BS:** Can you explain what you do at the times?

Andrew: Sure, the title is actually Multimedia Editor where I lead a group of ten folks that do multimedia. Different angles, I mean, half of my team is looking at how do you produce multimedia journalism through flash and interactive multimedia presentations. And the other half is looking at audio narratives and how do you write a script written for the ear, and working with the photo desk, and the video desk.

That's another thing, part of my job is also to be an ambassador to basically work in a collaborative environment like the times where we work very closely with the graphics desk led by ... and work collaboratively with Michelle McMalley at the photo desk. And at the video desk, the design desk, which is led by Corey ... so it's sometimes utter chaos but other times an enjoyable sort of collaborative environment to really push the idea of multimedia storytelling.

**BS:** What do you read/look at for multimedia information?

Andrew: There is the regular band of websites that are doing some phenomenal work such as the Washington Post, msnbc.com, and we look at our colleagues of the industry... Roanoke [Times], Detroit Free Press. There are some really good diverse ways of telling multimedia stories out there that I really enjoy. There are sites like that I created, interactive narratives, that helps me find and curate some of the best multimedia out there. The Wall Street Journal has also been doing some pretty interesting multimedia as well, both the data viz environment as well as some pretty strong video and photo audio slideshows. So that's the regular band of areas for inspiration, but I think other areas that I would lean towards in this industry and this is something I've been preaching for awhile which I still follow is this idea of you know, some of the museum kiosks experiences you see interactively, they're doing some phenomenal work in terms of visual storytelling on the web in an interactive way. The environment's a little different in the sense that you know, the news organization have a luxury of time is maybe a max of three to four weeks, whereas some of the more museums explorations can take months in terms of

development time. So you get what you try to develop, but again they're a point of inspiration as well and we're a point of inspiration for them as well.

**BS:** Some essentials of good multimedia.

Andrew: I do have a problem with the term multimedia, because even though that's part of my job title, it even means less to our readers. When they think of multimedia, its wow, that's ... I mean people really don't know what that is. Multimedia can go back to the days of CD-ROMs. That was multimedia. Even once you have video and audio, that becomes multimedia, but isn't that the same thing as television?

So in terms of multimedia, I do feel that just because it's video doesn't necessarily mean it's multimedia. I think the other components of well-crafted ... I don't know, that's why I like the term interactive narratives, because what you're really doing is telling a story in a narrative form and you're interacting with that content in its own sort of presentation and you're also interacting because a part of the strength of what we can do with the web is the fact that we're interacting with our audience.

If it's just a broadcast form of telling a story on PBS or basically on television in video, that's one form of telling a story. But, I think what really compels us is does it compel us to really dive into the story, but also, how can we engage with that story? I think there are some opportunities to try to push the boundaries with that at the Times. I think the best work that we do are these singular presentations, but, once you start interacting with that data or with that narrative, then ... I wouldn't want to push the interactivity just for the interactivity's sake, but, obviously there's meaning behind the interactivity. There needs to be a reason why you're asking a user to sort of engage with content and I think some of the value that you can engage them with is more precise, and pinpoint datasets to their particular point of view. Or, if you wanted to pinpoint your own personal interests in a particular narrative, you allow them to navigate to that part of the story. So I think there are some examples that we try to do that with. Our dead trap package, where we tell one full narrative, where you can tell the story through video or you can dissect the different levels of video that we had to either target the audience towards the young, or to the middle age or to the elderly. Or maybe the best way to dissect through that story is through complex data visualization types, and that's one way you can also tell that story.

And we also did a package called "Choosing a President" where from the outside it looks like just a regular video, but then when you actually dive into the interactive, you can notice there are links below the video player where you can then listen to other stories or other multimedia that kind of gets deeper into that package. You know, those are the levels of interactivity that we're looking at.

**BS:** What makes good multimedia?

**AD:** Well that's the basics. Let's make sure that A) the story has a full narrative. Are there characters that people can relate to? Is there a reason why you'd want to get into this story? So you can achieve that strictly out of a story. So how do you push that boundary? Is there a way to present that emotion or connection through photography or through video? So that's another component. How do you push that through a visual way to tell a story? And third, I would imagine is the interaction part of it. How do you digest it, how do you pinpoint, how do you segregate a particular case so that readers can actually get to the point where they're actually a little more compelled by that particular storytelling.

**BS:** When is it too much?

**AD:** well, the question you always need to ask is when does it stop giving more value. That depth doesn't necessarily mean length. So [just because] that story has four pages, doesn't mean that four page story has depth. It certainly has length. The same thing can go with multimedia. Are you adding the length to a narrative strictly out of adding the length rather than actually deepening the story? So when you can ask yourself and say are we adding value and depth to a package, and you get to a point where you can't answer positively yes, then maybe it is time to edit.

**BS:** Describe your workflow.

**AD:** Well, each project is its own beast. You know, has it's own process that we'd want to go for... is that we get involved pretty early on. We, being the multimedia team, we're not here to sort of support any sort of stories once the story's been written, but really working collaboratively with the desk and the reporters to sort of say, what kind of angle or depth can we offer a multimedia package that can go along with the text story. Rather than harrying it out at the end, it's about how do we tell a second narrative, if you will, to a text story. So the process there ideally would be to work with them collaboratively from the beginning, from the offset of that particular story. I mean that's not going to happen in every instance because I think in the organization we run on different deadlines. So it's unrealistic to expect that on a regular turn. So that would be the ideal situation, and there are situations where that in terms of processes, one thing that I've been noticing in terms of a trend is that there has to be multiple kill points. And when I say kill points I don't mean in a bad way, but multiple points where we recognize should we go on with this particular part of the story or should we change the angle? Or should we drop that multimedia. One of the scary things is that sometimes you may put up a multimedia package strictly of the fact that we have audio. But the question is does that audio offer something that really deepens the story, or adds value to the story? Or are we just putting up audio for the sake of putting up audio? So that's the kind of process that's ideal, it's that a way to recognize when there's an opportunity to move forward with a project or step back.

**BS:** Daily or special coverage?

**AD:** Multimedia desk is kind of more focused on the special coverage and the long-term enterprise projects. There are times when my desk will be involved on a quick turn around project, mainly because it's breaking news or something that may demand... I think my desk has been doing a lot of user generated projects as well. For example we launched the word train recently again, yesterday, in terms of the economy word train. And also we did the user generated photos of the inauguration, which we'll be doing yet another one in the very near future in terms of user generated photos based on the economy and so forth.

I think we're currently blessed right now with the ability to work on enterprise projects but you know I think it's also very key to remember that we are a news organization and we need to explain the news as best we can.

**BS:** Anything you wish you could change? Why not?

**AD:** I wish we could make money out of this. How do we monetize the value of what we're trying to do as journalists? Why aren't we doing it? I think there are lots of different conversations going on right now, so I will leave it to the news pundits to tackle that one.

**BS:** Ideal team, people and skills.

**AD:** One thing I hope I emphasized in this conversation is that what I've been trying to do is diversify the amount of skill sets on my team and to emphasize the fact that a lot of this can't be done without collaboration. There're a lot of smart people in the newsroom and a lot of smart people on multiple desks that it would be insane to try to come up with a team to do all of it. I think collaboration is key, I think all the data viz stuff that comes out of graphics is amazing that it would be insane to try to replicate that and the goal is to try to collaborate and work on more projects that are compelling like that. And also working with the video unit, we're developing a process where we're working more a lot more closely with adding our value in terms of being able to write together a script, maybe do motion graphics and to do a lot more interaction with the photo department to raise our presence online in video as well. Those are the skill sets I look for on my particular desk. Really strong ActionScript capabilities in the back end to be able to develop an interaction model where it's dynamic to the news. And the other area I've been beefing up as well is the audio narratives portion, and I think it's been nice to be able to work closely with Amy O'Learly and Sarah Kramer, and Nancy Donaldson to be able to tell stories with audio.

**BS:** Most successful project and why?

**AD:** I mentioned a couple of them, choosing a president is something we're proud of in collaboration with the politics desk, and collaboration with video and photo. Those are some ideal situations, and we had an opportunity to write a script written for the ear, working with photography and the crew from the staff here. Zach Wise

punched out some amazing motion graphics to illustrate what the election season looked like two years ago. That was a really enjoyable package to really get our teeth into. The debt trap package was something that was really exciting for us as well in a sense that you thought about how do you package all of these different types of story forms such as video and photos and interactive graphics into a seamless experience? Tom Jackson blew up the one in eight million package along with Sarah Kramer and Todd Heisler and Alexis \_\_\_ in terms of producing these voice narratives that were around the city around folks around New York City. So it's a weekly feature that week after week I've immensely proud of.

**BS:** Is there a best medium? What would be appropriate for what situation?

**AD:** I think we're back in that question of depth. You really need to ask yourself am I providing depth rather than length. There's a distinct difference there and if you're just tossing in video for the sake of video than you really need to ask yourself what does video really bring to this particular situation or to this particular storytelling, what does stories and vice versa so you need to push and pull at the same time in terms of questioning yourself what type of media will truly provide value and I think it really has to do with editing yourself because I don't think there is a right answer to that. Certainly there's ways to answer that video will really help and you can show motion, and stills when there's a particular moment you want to capture. And certainly you can toss that around and certainly one can argue that when the general was shot in Vietnam, the video itself of capturing that man fall in the street created motion, but the compelling part of that story was the photo taken at the instant that bullet hit his head. One can say that still photography can bring back more depth than the motion of a man falling to the ground.

**BS:** How is multimedia different from traditional media?

**AD:** I think the interaction model is what separates us from providing more depth or value to a reader or viewer. I think that's one area that no one's been exploring yet. For example, one in 8 million. At the end of the year we might have 52 stories. So as a test of time, if you go in there two years from now, and you see 52 stories, that's great. It's one way to digest that story. But another way to digest that story is to make it interactive. What if I only had 5 minutes of time, how can I make a decision for which one of those 52 stories I should go to first? It won't allow me to do that, but what if we had this opportunity to go in there and you find an interface where it's easier for you to identify maybe which stories you will resonate with faster. Those are tools that help me recognize which one based on my other habits across the web which one I might be drawn to. Or which one may surprise me. Maybe there's an algorithm that would say surprise me with this. So I think that's a form of interaction that I think I would love to explore, because we're doing it now. The whole Digg model of being able to comment and rate and dig and not dig and thumbs up or down certain comments. The dataset there is already pulling a news ecosystem that helps me understand the news around me. So an interaction model of being able to tell a story would be great to truly include this term of interactive

into another term called narratives. How do I make this in narrative form speak to me specifically?

**BS:** Are there criteria you use for choosing a story, or an angle for a story?

**AD:** The first thing I would ask is do I really care about this story? Do I see a reason or value of the people that would care about this story? Can I provide value? So, that's criteria. Also, is there a character in this story that will resonate with people? And other criteria will be: is there a lot of data, a lot of ways to digest this particular package?

**BS:** How does the audio team feel about using music or non-ambient sound?

**AD:** We certainly have used music in packages before, and I think that music can be a dangerous crutch, so one of the things we really have a conversation with each other is will the music again bring value to a package as opposed to creating itself to being a second character. That's the ultimate question. Is the ambient so loud and distinctive that it is creating a character on its own? When that happens you need to pull back. Because now you're relying on the music to carry on the narrative form and that's a dangerous crutch to fall to.

**BS:** Narration vs. subject telling story?

**AD:** We would love it so that it's Cinema Verite in that it would be great to just capture the story, the characters to tell the story. Unfortunately in the reporting world and real world that's not going to happen all the time. It's difficult to make that happen. Can a story be compelling and deep and engaging all from character voices? And unless you get the right take to make that happen, I would say it's going to be pretty difficult. So I wouldn't say that we use narration because it's easier to do, but sometimes it's the only thing we have. Sometimes we have to write a script to accelerate a story to make a point faster in a narrative or transition to another point in the story. You can't coach your stories that unethical. So you can build that transition over. Sometimes you have to work on another visual form to make that transition happen, such as title slates and fade to black or white. So you're still using some techniques to overcome the fact that getting strictly voice or character stories is very difficult, so oftentimes narration is the best way to do it.

**BS:** Functionality and design. Good design? Interactive elements that are successful in the past? And navigation?

**AD:** I think it's key to be consistent. So one of the things that we've been trying hard over the last couple years is to develop a design pattern library where each of our team members from graphics, us, news technology to use the same visual palate even in typography and color an size so people don't have to relearn how to use a particular interactive. They know exactly what one button would do, or have a good idea of what a button and link can do. That's one part of it, if you're building

something across a single experience such as the NYT, its key that you don't veer far from making the site usable. We work very closely with the core visitor in terms of finding the happy medium of intervision and consistency in terms of the site. Not just the interactive packages, but the rest of the site, from story level to multimedia interaction.

**BS:** Accessibility, foreign language, translations, cc, transcripts, screen readers?

**AD:** We don't optimize for screen readers, that's a limitation on what we provide, but at the same time, its quite expensive. I know there are some tools out there to make it more accessible but to integrate it with what we produce is a much more monumental task on our end. Not that we would be opposed to developing something in the future for that, but I think it's a bit of a challenge. In terms of foreign languages, that's something that especially since we launched the global homepage. I think that's one of the interesting aspects of it. When you look at it its not as global as you'd want it because it's all in English. The translation of that won't be a simple task. To try to outfit multiple languages on our infrastructure is a bit daunting. With that said I think we have had experiments with some our packages such as our coverage in Russia, where we've translated it into Russian to reach our Russian audience. And also our comments within that Russian package were also translated back and forth from Russian to English. Same thing we did with the environmental series we had in china. We actually translated our packages into mandarin to be able to reach another audience at a different level.

**BS:** Technologies you use? Prefer to use?

**AD:** Flash is our weapon of choice at them moment. We also work closely with Aaron in news technology and their weapon of choice on the front in is strictly CSS and all that, but they also have a rails backend so I think many times a lot projects work on my desk and I do question what is the best way to present this story and if it's in flash or not in flash I make an effort to say let's deliver this in CSS or DHTML rather than flash.

**BS:** Is most of the multimedia integrated into the site or standalone?

**AD:** A little bit of both. I think our audio slideshows we're strapped in technology wise into popup windows but that's a limitation of our technology, but all the other interactives we do are really integrated into the experience of the web. In the very near future it's going to get better.

**BS:** How much animated info graphics do you use?

**AD:** I think the graphics desk has done phenomenal work in terms of a lot of the step-by-step animation graphics, for example the explainer graphics. The crane collapse or the plane landing on the Hudson. It's phenomenal what they do in terms of a quick deadline. They do one for print and do a very good job translating it for

online using a very typical template we use in terms of step by step. Other data visualizations such as the election map demonstrates animation in that it displays different types of information over time and I think Steve and his desk has been able to push. And finally one thing we haven't tried and look forward to trying more, are not just animated graphics, but motion graphics in terms of how do you look at complex graphics that are in motion within video to push that boundary of storytelling. So all of this is something we're pushing and look forward to pushing even more.

**BS:** CMS and platforms

**AD:** The main chunk of our CMS right now used to be this context built, home grown system that was fitted off of this other CMS called Fatwire. It was all context built, but we're slowly migrating to another custom solution developed internally using PHP. My team is involved in mostly producing interactive graphics mostly in flash so our final destination is truly for the web and not any other sort of space. Not too much in mobile.

The first iPhone version was built from R and D and the second version was built with one guy in the dev team.

**BS:** Marketing/community, tracking readers, viewers?

**AD:** We use a system called web trends that we use in the backend in terms of being able to identify trends and traffic numbers. And that's about it!

**BS:** Do you post content to YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Digg?

**AD:** We do. Our marketing department handles most of that in terms of how we distribute our content across multiple platforms. We have a YouTube channel, Facebook group, we've run a few Facebook packages on Facebook for the inauguration. Our Twitter is relatively automatic, using our RSS feed. We also have NYT Communications Twitter, so you can follow that as well. Right now most of it is marketing right now, not editorial. Whether that will change or not, I don't know. I think we're all heavy users of Twitter, but I think there's enough reporters and editors out that are on twitter so you can get an inside scoop on what goes on at the times by following those users.

**BS:** Do you accept content from the community as well?

**AD:** Yeah, we actually just did that recently for this video series called the hard times where we're actually encouraging people to submit videos of any relatives that survived the depression in the 1930s. So that's an example of us trying to be engaged but not be opened ended that might cause its own problems. But I think it's important to recognize that the engagement with the community is going to be key in the survival and relevance of journalism and the news. So we're doing that. I

mentioned earlier about the inauguration photos from the users and readers I DC and across the globe.

**BS:** Contests you enter, value the most?

**AD:** They're like the necessary evil. It's one of those things that I love. Everybody will agree with this, but everybody loves a contest if they get recognized, but bash it if they don't get recognized. It's a necessary evil, I think contests in some way are exciting because its one way to recognize your work across industries but its also a way to recognize your work within an organization. Its great to say our work was recognized by this group of people and there's value in that and whether we over value that that's the subject of call, we're honored by winning them and participating in them. I think all of us, as a whole should be realistic about what that really means. I'll get excited and get a pat on the back when we can, and it feels good and gives value. Whether there's one specific one we're drawn to, not really.

**BS:** Competition categories fair/tweaks? Worked well?

**AD:** I think there's some competition by already creating categories you're creating a cylo of how do you define certain story forms. One of the best categories you can probably do is innovation. What is the most innovative as possible in terms of providing depth? But when you sort of say these are in the video category and photo category, you tie your hands in terms of limiting yourself in pushing the boundaries of what the future can bring.

**BS:** Have you judged before, and the criteria you use?

**AD:** Yeah, I think what I said earlier, if there was a category of innovation is one way to look at things. Not to pigeonhole, you can only categorize based on what you've seen in the past and you can only push the envelope there. I've judged competitions before and it's truly subjective. I was teasing a colleague the other day. Wouldn't it be interesting that before you submit an entry to know who those judges were ahead of time? Suddenly you determine which ones you want to submit based on who's judging. It's all based on where people's lenses come from. You might have a judge whose background is strictly video rather than still photography.

**BS:** Is that a problem?

**AD:** I think the challenge in trying to organize a contest is trying to get a collective voice in the panel of judges. They can't be all the same.

**BS:** So you need someone in every background.

**AD:** Yeah, especially if you're trying to compare entries with others. They can't be all photographers. If you're going to judge a contest and its multimedia and all the judges are strictly photographers, then you already have a problem.

**BS:** Competition?

**AD:** Washington Post, NPR, Wall Street Journal, LA Times, Chicago Tribune does excellent work, still are, think everyone has their moments. If there was a Yankees in the industry all the time, I think it would get boring. A lot of the competition is looking at fresh blood.

**BS:** Eye tracking, focus groups, test?

**AD:** We do. The one in 8 million package, we did usability testing mainly because we knew that was going to be a package that was going to re-launch week after week and it made sense for us to get a better understanding of how people used it and what their expectations were. We also have very similar story forms that are recurring that we test across users as well to get a baseline expectation. We have a UEX group in the building and we bring in users from the outside and look at how they look at our features, and we apply what we learn from them.

**BS:** Sites you follow?

**AD:** Multimedia Shooter, multimedia news is finding some stuff I typically won't see either, I kind of look at those two particular sites, and then the blogs are doing some great work as well. I follow some blogs that look at interactive graphics and media in terms of photojournalism. If you can find them there's a wealth of information out there. The Netvibes website of interactive narratives has a series of the sources I follow in terms of multimedia storytelling. [Interactivenarratives.netvibes.com](http://Interactivenarratives.netvibes.com).

**BS:** Future of multimedia

**AD:** It's going to my iPhone; that's where the future is at. I'm only half joking. But you know, I love being able to...some of the best integration I've seen on an iPhone for video is Flickr, I have an app called mobilephotos and you can scour your photos on Flickr and when you see a video you can hit play. TO me its, wow, its getting there, and you can scale maps on Google Maps. We don't even need flash on iPhone, maybe there's another way of making this happen. That's part of the danger of relying everyone going flash. Waiting for something to happen, but its happening with another route.

**BS:** cutting edge new things?

**AD:** I like the seadragon stuff out of Microsoft, I like to play with any multitouch screens, how to interact with a space such as that. I love the whole Wii remote and creating a 3d environment in a screen. All of that is pushing the boundary of how to immerse yourself in a story. The whole hologram thing on CNN, I'm not too sure.