

Multimedia Standards

<http://www.multimediastandards.org>

Gary Kebbel: I'm Gary Kebbel and I'm the journalism program director at the Knight Foundation in Miami. In this role, one of the things that I do is administer the twenty-five-million-dollar five-year Knight News Challenge Project, which seeks digital innovation for community news projects. Additionally, the Knight Foundation is very interested in other types of community news projects that extend the voice of people in communities and is seeking to make sure that all communities have a greater chance to be informed and engaged in the digital era. I came to Knight Foundation after having been news director at America Online for six years and before that, in various jobs, I was one of the founding editors of USAToday.com and also of Newsweek.com.

Matt Byrnes: Why don't you go ahead and tell me what type of resources you use to stay current with multimedia storytelling, such as magazines or Web sites you visit or shows that you watch that keep you current in this industry.

GK: Well, in terms of multimedia storytelling that interests me the most, I'm looking for new ways to tell stories that are of local news interest in particular, but generally of news interest so I'm not following as much the entertainment stories as I'm more interested in news and local news. So in that sense, I watch a lot of what The Washington Post and The New York Times do – I look at National Geographic and try to see what types of things can be learned from what they're doing.

MB: If you could define the essentials of good multimedia what would those be?

GK: Well, I would say good multimedia is using whatever the tools are to their best and most natural, most native, capabilities; and let me qualify that by saying that it's also choosing which tools to use. So if a story needs audio and is told best with audio the first thing is that you realize that. If a story is told best with video or with a combination of video and text you realize that. So I think it starts out with the planning and the thought and the recognition of what is the story about, what's the essence of the story, and then, how do I best convey that essence. If the essence is fear, if the essence is joy, if the essence it is revulsion, how do you convey that? Is it audio? Is it music? Is it audio with words? Is it video? Is it text? Is it a game? I think that when you decide that and then you focus on using those tools in the best most natural way that they should be used as part of their media and using the full capabilities of what they have.

MB: Tell me, what is your personal workflow when it comes to working on a multimedia project?

GK: Well, remember that as a founder at Knight Foundation, what I'd do is enable others to have the funds to create multimedia products. So in my role I'm not creating daily multimedia projects. What I am doing is looking at the plans and proposals of others who want to do it.

MB: When you're looking over these proposals -- if anybody does outline some sort of a particular strategy -- are there any in the past you've seen to be particularly successful and useful?

GK: I think, again, that the multimedia plans that seem to have the greatest chance of coming across as easy and natural and comfortable are the ones where the editor or developer is taking full account of the environment that they're working in and the tools that they're working with and the type of story that they want to tell, and they're putting that all together and they're doing it with a recognition of their time limitations so that if the story they want to tell is breaking news, like on a battlefield, you obviously do things differently than if you're preparing a piece for two weeks from now. All of that has to be taken into account

MB: Do you think multimedia is best used for daily coverage or just special coverage?

GK: I think it's both. I think that, again, that the tools are such that it's easy enough to produce a video of a daily news event as well as to write a text story and have both posted online. So the question is, what's the quality and what's the complexity that you're talking about? Posting a roughly edited video of a daily news event is fine in many cases. It's not going to rise to the level of getting people to sit back and go "wow that's astonishing." So, again, what's the goal of the site, what's the goal of the project, and that considered, I think the audience is understanding and if they realize they're watching something that was prepared over time they expect higher quality -- they expect greater integration of a variety of media than if they are watching something that occurred two hours ago and it's breaking news. They expect whatever can be done in that time and I think they are rather understanding of that.

MB: So is there anything you're seeing nowadays that you think isn't really working that you would suggest changing?

GK: That's a good question. I would think that there's a lot of the use of certain tools just because people can, just because they're there. The right tool needs to be selected for the story and sometimes there's a tendency to use tools because you can, use tools because they're new, use tools because they're popular and use tools because they're complex, and sometimes the most complex and cool new tool is not the right one for that story.

MB: When do you think it is too much? Have you seen any occasions where you think the multimedia was kind of unwarranted or just exhausting?

GK: In essence for say a bureaucratic story or boring story; you don't need a video report of every city council meeting. I would say stories along that nature, where nothing that exciting is happening, yet, you're doing video and doing lots of cuts and fades and zooms and spicing up things where the content is just the opposite of that. So I would say that's the biggest thing. The contents and then the multimedia and the editing all need to coincide, and if the content is a slower story than the editing should not be incredibly fast paced. If the content is a drag raced, the editing shouldn't be slow paced.

MB: So what would your ideal team of people be working on a multimedia project and what would their skill-sets encompass?

GK: Well, if I had the time, the team would include people who could shoot and edit video and audio. It would include a graphic artist. It would include a database specialist and they would all be working together with either someone who's a good writer or they are all good writers.

MB: How is story telling different in multimedia than traditional media and what is the criteria to choose a story angle within multimedia?

GK: Let me answer the question about choosing a story angle in multimedia first.

Basically, you need to recognize what your story is before you think of the media, so again, if your story is a drag race it's one thing – if your story is a council meeting it's an entirely different thing and you need to choose media that tells the story the best. If the story is about public officials graft that's one thing. If the story is about the first baby born in the New Year that's another thing. There are wildly different stories, and therefore, you should not have a cookie cutter approach to the multimedia that you would use in telling those stories. You really got to look at the story and evaluate each one on a one-by-one basis -- as individual things and look at the media you have and the capabilities you have with that media. Recognize your strengths and weaknesses with the actual shooting or producing of the media and then choose what best tells the story.

MB: Back to the first question, how is storytelling different in multimedia than in traditional media?

GK: Again, you have a lot more to consider when telling a story with multimedia because there are a lot more variables. You have a lot more tools so if you're just telling a story by going out, reporting it and writing it -- either for the newspaper or just a text version on the Web site -- that's one thing. You concentrate on the reporting, the story angle and writing story. If you're doing this in multimedia then you have to edit photos, you have to think about sound, you have to think about video, or you have to think about which one or two or three of those to use and it gets much more complex.

MB: In terms of ethics, how do you feel about the use of music in multimedia stories, or the use of non-ambient sounds to enhance the mood in storytelling?

GK: Well, first let's make the assumption that any music or any sound is legally acquired and that people have the rights to use that and then, secondly, should they use it to enhance the story or tell the story? Again, I think that is a tool to be determined by the story. There will be times when silence best tells the story. There will be a time when just a voice best tells the story. There will be times when a voice with background music best sets the mood and I don't see anything wrong with setting a mood. If the mood you want to convey is joy, sorrow, fear or revulsion then your goal should be to have the listener or

the user thinking, "I now feel happy, I now feel joy, I now feel sorrow." You want them to feel the emotion that you're hoping that they do and you are trying to make them feel through the telling of the story and setting it up and producing it the way you have. So your goal is the creation of that emotion in another person. As long as you do that with legal tools, I see nothing wrong with doing your best to try to create that emotion.

MB: What is your opinion of good design elements and interactive elements? What have you found to be particularly successful in the past?

GK: I think with good design elements, you need to be looking at things that are easy to use, that are intuitive, that are simple, that tell the user right away what you want them to do, what you want them to do next and where you want them to go. You don't want them to have to spend time or energy thinking of the fourteen options here on this webpage. Which is the one I'm supposed to click first and which one am I supposed to click second. So good interface and good user design are absolutely critical.

MB: Do you have any preference about certain programming languages or programs that people should be using nowadays?

GK: No particular preferences other than to think about what do most people have already on their computer; what level of sophistication do people have in the programs that they have downloaded and that they use and have access to and are you creating a story that you want primarily told in the United States or that you want worldwide, and if it's worldwide, you've got to think about either designing a second version or think about designing differently. If you want the story told both in the United States and in Africa, the quality of the infrastructure is so different in the two countries. Flash for instance does not work well a lot of places in Africa because the Internet is so slow there, and then something else to think about is that more people there probably do have mobile phones now, so how do you think about at their access of the story on mobile if that's their only device. Are you designing it only for a Web site or are you designing it for a Web site as well as for mobile access.

MB: Are you seeing anything that the Knight Center is funding or working on particularly to make news accessible through the inclusion of multimedia with closed captioning and maybe automated transcripts? Do you see any of that going on and do you think that's also essential to multimedia storytelling?

GK: Couple things -- first of all, where I work is the Knight Foundation. We have a couple Knight Centers so I just don't want there to be any confusion there. Concerning closed captioning, I think that it's something that more and more people need to incorporate. It's something that is relative. I mean that the television stations have figured out relatively easy and automated ways of doing it. So the technology is there and I think it's not often used enough on Web sites.

MB: In terms of infographic, what role do you think they should play in a multimedia Web site?

GK: Infographics can almost be thought of as a mini game or a simple game – a short quick game and, as such, they should both involve the user and teach the user, and they can teach in two ways. They can teach the facts that people want to get across with that story but they can also teach thought patterns or teach about issues or systems. They can teach about the deeper things that are either connecting issues or creating problems. For instance, a budget graphic might teach you that if you have a finite budget that you have to pass with a set amount maximum, and you allocate so much to education, what does that do to health and what does that do to transportation and roads. If you can see all of that at once then you're not just making numerical allocations but you're also making value judgments and you're understanding how taking away from one and adding another creates a different society -- one that has people with better health care or better transportation and maybe not both. So I would say a good informational graphic can be thought of as a good mini game that involves people and teaches them.

MB: On the topic of content management systems, I heard a rumor, and it kind of makes sense to me, that the Knight Foundation was going to start funding companies that are working on developing content management systems.

GK: Let me just say what we are funding. Knight Foundation is interested in funding open source software development and our big goal is funding any sort of software projects that are open source. That said, that means we have funded Drupal projects and Joomla projects and Django and Ajax projects, and we're fine with any and all of those. As long as the final project that ensues from our funding is free and available for anyone else to either use, download, modify and get back to the community. As a result of the Knight News Challenge, we saw a lot of applications for people who wanted to use Drupal to develop either content management systems or additional modules in the Drupal core. We look at all of them and we said there are so many projects here that require a specialized knowledge of Drupal that we don't have the expertise to judge these. So we went to the Drupal community and we said you guys know this stuff. You guys run this contest. We'll create a new part of the contest in which you solicit, seek, judged, evaluate and recommend to us the best Drupal products that meet Knight Foundation's goal of improving communication and communities using digital tools. So as a result of that, we have funded in the past month, six projects, all of which are using Drupal. That does not mean that we're only finding Drupal – it means that we found a lot of people who want to use Drupal and we found a Drupal community very active in wanting to help us judge and evaluate those projects, and if the same thing were to happen with a different community we would look at that also.

MB: In terms of marketing and tracking how well the Web sites and the multimedia projects are doing, do you know how the Knight Foundation tracks their readers and viewers of Web sites that that they have funded?

GK: Well, we require that the various grantees use whatever metrics that are available to them. Typically, they're using Google metrics and they're looking at things like unique users, time spent, page views, return visits and they're trying to gauge both the numbers

of involvement, number of unique users, number of pages viewed but also all the level of involvement or commitment by the time spent and return visits.

MB: Does the Knight Foundation post any content whether it's for marketing purposes or viral purposes on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Digg, etc?

GK: Yes we do. We have a Twitter account. We post video on Facebook and Vimeo. Many of our staff are on Facebook. We have project pages on Facebook.

MB: Does the Knight Center utilize citizen journalism? Does it accept content from the community?

GK: In the projects that we fund, yes. In our Foundation Web site, no we don't. We look at ideas from people but our sites are not open for general contribution because we are focusing that effort in our grantees.

MB: So could you tell me a little bit about some of the contests that the Knight Foundation has created, why they created them, and if there's one that you particularly value the most.

GK: Yes, Knight Foundation is indeed involved in various contests and one that I'm involved in is called the Knight News Challenge. It's a twenty-five-million-dollar contest, over five years, to seek digital innovations for community news projects and, in particular, to focus those innovations on a specific geographic community. One reason we do this is because we have accepted the fact and understood the fact that we don't have all the answers, number one, and number two, even if you're asking questions you frame the type of answers that you get. So we're trying to be as open as possible and saying, "what ideas do you have and what do you think the answer should be in helping communities get more information in the digital age?" So the contest process allows us to be open to ideas from anyone around the world and we have found that that has given us projects that we simply never would've thought of.

MB: Have you ever judged a multimedia competition before and what criteria do you use while judging the competitions?

GK: I've only judge multimedia when it's been part of a larger goal, and by that I mean, I've judged a news Web site as the entire site. If multimedia were part of that site I've judge that, or if there is a particular reporting project that has used multimedia. I have not judged an entire multimedia contest, so in the context of judging, in essence, the news use of multimedia, again, what I look for is how easy does the project load on a PC and Mac, and does it work equally as well on a PC and on a Mac, and does it have possibilities for mobile distribution and then what's the user interface, how intuitive is it and how user friendly is it -- and from reading about and learning the project, then I go back and look at the project again and look at the first thing that I see and see if that first thing tells me the point. After reading the whole story and watching the video and taking the quiz and doing everything involved -- does the initial impression of the project convey what I have

learned from looking at the entire project. In other words, how edited and how well presented is the project? Is the first snippet that the user sees indeed the right, correct, actual snippet that the entire project is about?

MB: What do you generally think is the future of multimedia?

GK: More and more computers get more and more capabilities and greater memory and faster processors and they get cheaper. So number one, the future is that more people will be able to afford a greater capability of seeing and participating in multimedia. That will mean that as the audience grows the content will grow. So there will be a lot more multimedia storytelling and it will be faster and easier and will be a much more natural part of all of our information seeking habits.

MB: What digital innovations are you the most excited about -- particularly in order to interact with the audience?

GK: I'm excited by any innovations that allow the audience to have a greater voice and that help people use that voice to connect with others, and then in particular, that that connection allows them to identify common problems and seek common solutions. So it's those tools that allow people to learn information and connect with others to try to act on that information, and I don't frankly care what the tools are because next year they are going to be different.

MB: Are there any Web sites in particular that you follow for technology news or design and Web site innovation?

GK: Mainly, I take the shortcut route of signing up for various news lists, whether it's through Media Post or through I Want News, and I focus on what is new and being reported there as well as PaidContent.org, and I realize that none of those are multimedia sites but what they do is talk about the news and what's new in the field of digital media. So you learn about who's doing what and when.