

Multimedia Standards
<http://www.multimediastandards.org>

Holly Max: So you are the Nerd In Chief of Journerdism, that's right?

Will Sullivan: Yes, that's correct.

Holly: So if you don't mind, I just have a couple questions. I'm doing a project on multimedia, and so I just have a couple questions about Journerdism and also the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, so let's begin.

Will: Sure

Holly: If you could just introduce yourself – just to talk about who you are, what you do, I guess in terms of Journerdism and the St. Louis Post Dispatch.

Will: Okay, well I'm the Interactive Director at the Post Dispatch, so I kind of help bring the newsroom into the new digital age. So it means wearing a lot of hats, you know, working with the multimedia department, working with advertising, working with everyone in the newsroom, kind of doing training, and trying to raise standards and create new journalism, and also make a profit as a business and sustain interesting content. For Journerdism, it's just a hobby of mine - I update it fairly frequently just to try and stay on top of what's new in the industry, and track what's going on in technology and journalism and track where the two intersect and where there are potential opportunities for the future of these organizations.

Holly: Our purpose is to define what multimedia is – we've all come up with our own definitions, but in your opinion, could you, in one short sentence, give a definition of what multimedia is, or means to you?

Will: I think it's just storytelling unconstrained, and delivered in the format that's best to the storyline and the content.

Holly: If you could define the essentials of good multimedia, what would you list as criteria.

Will: There's generally some technical standards that everybody is going to expect from their exposure to media from their entire lives. I think a big thing that a lot of multimedia lacks right now, there's not a lot of talk about it, but having a good storyline, storytelling and story arch, and a lot of people just kind of throw up content just to throw up content, and there's not really any purpose or path through the information. I think that something that shows you something new, or teaches you something new, or exposes you to a new idea really makes good multimedia – something that stirs you to either emotionally, or mentally, those are critical parts of good multimedia. Or something that delights you or entertains you could be good multimedia, also.

Holly: In terms of your team, when you are doing a story, what would be the ideal people on your team and their skills?

Will: It really depends on the story. Certain stories, you want some data people to be at your disposal, certain stories you want really visually heavy photojournalists, certain stories you really need great editors, so basically it's multi-skilled people that have specific skills in certain areas, that can be brought in and you don't have to teach them a new thing – everybody's up to speed on the general standard of what good multimedia is, and then they can contribute on their specific levels that they are skilled at. So the videographer doesn't have to totally understand everything about databases and how to do visualizations or video games or multimedia graphics, but he does have to have an appreciation for what's good for that medium versus what's good for his medium of videography.

Holly: So if you had to choose one project that you think was the most successful thus far, and tell me why it was the most successful.

Will: The one that I think had the most impact was the Train Jumping project but it wasn't extensive, multilayered, multimedia, it was essentially just audio slideshows, but because the images were so strong and the storyline was just really good it kind of sits on its own and it didn't need video or 3D infographics or anything like that. But I think it could have been enhanced at that time if we had people with that skill set. But that was three or four years ago now, so it was very early in the multimedia age.

Holly: In terms of storytelling, what medium would you say is the best?

Will: I think the one that most people are most familiar with, I don't know if it makes it the best, but it's the one that people are most comfortable with understanding, it has to be video – people have grown up with TV and movies, its very traditional. One of its challenges is that its linear, so it may not be as interactive and engaging sometimes, but part of that linearness of it makes you really come to straight on developing a clear storyline, so it's much easier to create an engaging and informative presentation that way, than some of the other forms. I wouldn't say it's the killer app but I think it's the one that everybody's comfortable with and understands how to interact with. There's lots of things like 3D visualization that are great tools, but they're just so foreign that people like my mom wouldn't know how to interact with them unless there's a really simple interface and really simple interactive tools involved with it. So that's a long answer to say video.

Holly: When you're choosing a story to be told, what would you say is the criteria in order to choose the story in terms of what you're going to cover, and the angles that you're going to cover the story, things like that?

Will: The big thing is that it has to be unique and interesting. Having good visuals is a big thing and the most important thing probably overall is assuming that you have access,

if you don't have access to cover a story you can't do it, so that's the biggest thing, the gatekeeper above everything is that you have to have good access.

Holly: In terms of ethics, when you're doing a multimedia project, how do you feel about using music in your pieces; non-ambient sound to enhance the mood of the project, how do you feel about that, in terms of ethics?

Will: I think it's overused in a lot of situations, and I think that a lot of people throw a loop up and assume that it's good. It's just to kind of cover up the bad audio or something like that I think it has great power, but like Spiderman says, "with great power comes great responsibility." There's a level there where you can really control people's emotions and you can really cross the line and there's a certain level of storytelling that you can kind of do that, but then there's a certain level where people just do it just because it's a quick and easy way to cop out so I think with proper training it can be done well and used well in certain situations but you've really got to have proper training and I think there's a lot of organizations that don't have that at all, going for them, and just throwing it out there just because there's no standards, because were kind of laying the tracks as we develop the language and the craft of multimedia.

Holly: When you're covering a story about a person who is living in extremely harsh conditions and the story is just completely overwhelming and difficult for them to see their own story, how would you feel about showing them, the people that you're covering, how would you go about that? Would you show them the story, would you show it to them, in terms of ethics, what do you think is right?

Will: I have no problem, I would definitely show them the story. If you can't say to your sources' face what you're going to write about them, then you shouldn't be writing it. It's the rough part of being a journalist.

Holly: So in terms of functionality and design, what would you say is good design in terms of the interactive developments that you use on your site. What interactive development have you found to be successful in the past?

Will: I think the big thing, I know the New York Times does it a lot and we've started implementing it with our projects is developing a general standard design and template so that people, when they come to your site, they know what the close button looks like and what the next button looks like, so they're kind of familiar with the visual language of your site. It also really helps with workflow and getting things done quickly because you don't have to, every single time, reinvent what the next button looks like because it's a standardized template. You kind of lose some of the customization in that effort but I think you make up for it in the level of user experience and understanding and depth that people will go through your projects because they're easy to understanding and easy to navigate because they've done it and they understand what the buttons and the whole design is communicating.

Holly: In terms of languages, what languages do you guys use, in terms of flash, javascript, html, that kind of stuff

Will: We use all that, we haven't gotten to the really advanced scripting languages yet, like Python or Ruby, but definitely xml, flash, html, css, javascript, those are all very important tools.

Holly: You embed Flash into HTML or would you do a whole site in Flash?

Will: I would embed flash into html. Flash is like a battleship. Sometimes you only need a little rowboat to get things done – some people go crazy and build entire sites in flash and you can do that, but it's kind of like with music, you've got to really be a master of it to really do it well. It's such a complicated program. So I definitely don't advise always building sites in completely in Flash, I always like to have kind of, some sort of html shell that's containing them that's a lot friendlier.

Holly: In terms of accessibility, are you guys doing any foreign language coverage, and if you are, do you offer closed captioning or transcripts for people who don't speak English or also for deaf people?

Will: We don't actually, and that's one thing that I really enjoyed at the Palm Beach Post, because in Florida, we had a very diverse community especially a very high Spanish speaking community. Like that Train Jumping project that I mentioned, we did it both in Spanish and in English, so I think that's a great thing and that's one of the problems. That those types of issues are so high level that the level that a lot of newspapers are doing multimedia that's it's just not discussed at all, and like with music, the ethics of music, no one should be discussing it because people are still learning as they're going, but I think that eventually we'll get to develop standards that everybody can follow and those larger, high level issues like sensibility will become much more important and there will be standards developed and hopefully it will be a lot more better experience for everybody.

Holly: On your sites, is multimedia integrated into the site or does it stand alone?

Will: It kind of depends on the project, some of it's integrated in, some of it stands alone, we've got a really bad CMS, which is just miserable, so it's sometimes a lot more challenging than it should, to be honest, like, my personal blog, I can integrate things a lot easier than on our site, which is a very sad thing to say but it's the truth. And I think a lot of newspapers feel that challenge, but when we can and when it's especially at the whole, we definitely try and embed it, especially high promotion like above the fold, and with large graphical displays so that people can catch it and pay attention.

Holly: You mentioned CMS, what are you using and what platforms are you building in?

Will: Well our blogs are all in Wordpress, or CMS is a homegrown Frankenstein monster of lotus notes, and we're about to switch over to a new corporate CMS in the fall, from

the enterprises but, yeah, so we've got a very integrated system right now that's just been totally customized for over a decade now, but we're building something new, hopefully that will improve things a lot, especially workflow, and combining multimedia elements with traditional newspaper reporting storytelling elements.

Holly: You mentioned earlier about infographics, do you use animated infographics on any of the sites?

Will: Yeah, it depends on the story, but our graphics department is very, that's one of the things that really impressed me when I came here, is they were very forward thinking and a lot of them are all trained in flash, so they're very skilled in multimedia and motion graphics and very excited about doing that. So it depends on the story, but when there's an opportunity, we definitely dive on them, especially if we're explaining complex scientific things and things like that.

Holly: How do you guys track your viewers?

Will: We have several analytics tracking tools, we use Omniture we use Quantcast, we're talking about integrating Google Analytics [just to check](#) that's our major kind of analytics and tracking tool.

Holly: Besides your sites, do you guys post your content on other sites like YouTube or Twitter, Facebook, Digg, things like that?

Will: Yeah definitely, we have had some battles over this, some people aren't fans of us, but I think we have won most of those battles and have moved forward a lot. You know we rarely post things to YouTube. During the political convention the whole political season for the presidential election, you know, our political team was basically given the charge that if they wanted to go and cover the political conventions and you know travel and all that, they had to basically build it all for online first and then build for the print product so you know we have two mobile streaming video phones, they all have Twitter accounts, they have used them very extensively to report live events, their blog is probably one of the biggest in Missouri. You know we haven't had a ton of success from loading things on Digg and those kind of social media news sites, we drop things in occasionally, but its really kind of targeted things that have more kind of general broad reaching interests. We've tried to focus on being a very local paper so you know the local church shooting may not play as well on Digg as you know the dog with only two legs does, so we kind of pick and choose our battles and when we promote we definitely see good traffic when we do pick the right story to promote there. If you go to stltoday.com/twitter you can see you know a ton of people in our news room using Twitter, like all the profile accounts are listed there and we've got some kind of flagship ones for you know, they're kind of like Chicago Tribune where they're kind of interacting with the audience and stuff.

Holly: Have you guys entered any multimedia contests in the past and if you have, I'd like to know why you chose that contest over other contests, and why you value that particular contest

Will: We enter contests all the time, I don't usually handle the entries we've got someone specific that does that for entering all contests not just multimedia, so I guess I'm kind of speaking personally here. Some of them I think might have high prestige, like I really, really admire SND's multimedia contests because they have such high standards for activity multimedia and design, I think its one of the most prestigious because they give out so few awards and it's always these really, really huge great presentations from the top organizations. I kind of wish they had stuff for smaller groups, but that's just kind of how they roll. You know, we enter NPPA, POY, ONA... We won ONA last year. I wouldn't say we prefer any contests over any other, I guess, it would be nice to win a Pulitzer, I'm glad they started taking online entries.

Holly: Have your projects been recognized? Have you won any contests?

Will: I mean we won two at ONA last year, we just won something, a video for the NPPA, we won for the local and state organization, so we do fairly well, I mean, I think throughout the industry, there's been a noticeable step-down in how much multimedia content people are producing just because of job cuts and what not so that makes it harder to find lots of entries to enter, you know, but I think we do fairly well, especially last year. We won two ONA awards, I think we tied with two other organizations for the most ONA awards in a year.

Holly: In your opinion, what would you say is the criteria for judging multimedia?

Will: I think the story is the biggest thing I look for. There's understanding of visuals and having high technical quality and content, you know, you don't want to give an award to someone who can't edit their audio without having pops in it throughout the entire presentation; the story is the big thing, for me though. I think interface is important also, but story is huge. I'd take a horrible YouTube video with a great story over the most technically produced shiny interface. I really think story is kind of like the great equalizer, a lot of places cant afford this fantastic, awesome video equipment and brand new lenses, and that's where the story comes in, whether its told on a cell phone or HD, it's what moves people, it's what sticks with them.

Holly: For a multimedia contest, what would be your ideal set of categories?

Will: Well I don't think that there's a lot of recognition for people that are experimenting and trying new things, it's kind of hard to say if, like, a lot of contests basically have video slideshows and then projects, and I think there's a lot of opportunity for things like panoramas and gaming and visualizations that would be difficult to slice off as a whole separate category but I think like a category is like innovation in multimedia would be interesting to kind of drop all those kinds of leading edge type projects, but obviously like I said, video slideshows, audio slideshows and then projects or packages are big areas

that I think a lot of organizations are producing in content that they could have a healthy competition, but I'd really like to see something like that that in the innovation and the technology.

Holly: What do you see for the future of multimedia? What would you say is the future of multimedia?

Will: I really think gaming, mobile devices, and GPS navigational devices, and news being released in shorter, faster, more collaborative environments is kind of going to be the Ven diagram of the future, but I really think gaming is just going to be huge. Video I guess is a very comfortable format, it's very, especially advertiser friendly, I think video is always going to be around, but when it comes to, like, interactive video and interactive gaming on a video screen, I think that's probably where things are going to continue moving, especially on mobile devices, like the iPhone is just like a little mini gaming system – there's lots of graphics there.

Holly: What about digital innovations for an audience to interact with the multimedia project?

Will: I think there's things like Microsoft Photosynth, they've started doing like video photosynthesis where there's kind of collaborative multimedia content creation, I think that's kind of an interactive development, and I think especially as the people start to unlock their phones and make a GPS and kind of, you know, where they're located at that specific time, it gives you an ability to link up with other people that you don't even know, you know like if everybody on YouTube is streaming from a specific location, YouTube can combine all the information and create kind of a 3D environment that almost, I think there's just a lot of great opportunities there it's just a matter of pooling all the information and the users having the tools, which they pretty much have now, it's just hot to pool that information and compile it into something that has meaning.

Holly: What sites do you follow in order to cover multimedia?

Will: I have a lot of RSS feeds, lots of bloggers and photographers and videographers, I have Yahoo Pipes set up with keywords that I'm interested in, big things like Interactive Narratives, Multimedia Shooters, you know, my blog, I love my blog it's fantastic. But no, those are the big ones, Multimedia Shooter and Interactive Narrative, I do a lot of reading on Delicious, which is a social bookmarking site and a lot of the people that are in my network are kind of creative innovative multimedia visualization nerds, so a lot of stuff that I see that they're seeing inspires me also, so it's a lot of RSS feeds basically and just kind of digging through the ocean of content on the limb.

Holly: Alright, well that's all the questions that I have today, so thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me

Will: No problem

Holly: And good luck to you in the future

Will: Thanks! Let me know if you need anything else

Holly: Ok great thank you so much Will

| **Will:** [No](#) problem, bye.

| **Holly:** [Bye](#).