

# Multimedia storytelling

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Telling stories for a multi-platform news organization involves several choices. They won't all apply to every story, but you should consider them with every story:

- Should you file immediately for digital audiences?
- What are the multimedia elements of your story?
- How can you make the story interactive?
- What links will provide greater depth?
- Should you tell this story in an alternate form, something other than the traditional string of paragraphs?

As you consider each question, decide what job this story is doing for the user. Are you amusing, informing, giving useful information? The job that the story does will often help you decide how to tell it. Also consider your audience for the story. These considerations about potential users will guide some of your decisions about how to tell the story. Effective storytelling is a collaborative process among journalists with varying specialties. Communication and coordination throughout the process are essential.

## Be first with the news

The ridiculous concerns about “scooping yourself” online have finally been put to rest in much of the newspaper industry. Before the Web, we had to concede an advantage to broadcast media in covering breaking news. Now we can and must own breaking news. It drives web traffic and it marks your organization as the place to turn for news. So reporters need to learn what to break online and how to write an unfolding story.

**Accuracy still rules.** When you cover a breaking news story online, basic rules on accuracy and verification don't waver. Your standard of completeness changes, but not your standard of accuracy. You can report a one-sentence bulletin and add updates as you get them. But don't report even a single sentence unless you are confident enough of the facts in that sentence to print them.

**File the news bulletins and updates however you can.** A wireless-equipped laptop is the best tool for filing breaking news. But you can email or text-message from a phone or PDA or call an editor and dictate. Whatever your tools, whatever the situation, the reporter's job is to get key facts online as soon as you can verify them.

**Consider liveblogging.** Whether you are covering a breaking news story or a routine event such as a festival or government meeting, consider a liveblog, where you file a running account online, updated every few minutes with takes ranging from a single sentence to a few paragraphs. You can liveblog by posting frequent updates in almost any

blogging software. Or you can use a program developed specifically for liveblogging, such as CoverItLive. Consider whether to allow interaction with the audience in the liveblog. You can Twitter. You can Twitter using a hashtag and feed all tweets using the hashtag (including those from the public) into CoverItLive.

**Digital is more than web.** For an important breaking story, most organizations now use a brief text-message or email alert as the first step in telling the story. Practice using words effectively to convey the important news in just a few characters. The same brief alert can also be a Twitter or RSS feed.

**Tell the story.** After you have filed the first few facts as bulletins and brief updates, consider a writethru for a significant story. This will give your web users an overview of the story and give you an early draft of your print version of the story.

## Consider multimedia

**Consider video.** Video is especially important to young users who are enjoying video on YouTube and other Internet sites. You need to make it an important part of your storytelling toolbox. If you're covering an event, video can almost always be part of the story package. If characters are telling you interesting stories, let them tell part of the story in their own voice on a video clip. Video works best in stories with action or emotion. It's best in stories where you are present for the action, rather than trying to figure out after the fact what happened. Talking heads giving information doesn't make good video. Boring meetings are as boring on video as in stories. We don't have to shoot all the video ourselves. More and more of life is captured on video. Even if a colleague is shooting video for a story or if we aren't shooting video ourselves, video should be part of the information-gathering process. You can ask for official videos, security videos and home videos that will help you tell the story. You can use the web site to ask users to contribute their videos. Live webcams provide strong video for some events, such as disasters, festivals, demolitions or construction projects. Streaming video can really enhance a liveblog.

**Consider audio.** Digital audio recorders let you capture the voices of your characters. Telling stories in audio form allows users to download them to iPods and listen to them as they travel or work. Again, you don't have to gather all the audio yourself. Recordings of official meetings or emergency phone calls or police radio traffic can bring extra audio dimensions to a story.

**Consider slide shows.** Slide shows let you tell stories in still photographs much more powerfully than the few photographs (or single photo) you have space for in your print edition.

**Consider sound slides.** Sometimes a video of a character speaking is pretty static visually. Put that voice over a slide show relating to the story, and you might have a strong storytelling tool.

**Consider virtual reality.** If the place you are writing about is important, you can show it to the user in a detailed interactive way by shooting 360-degree photographs and editing them into a steerable virtual reality that lets the user see what the place really looks like.

**Consider PowerPoint.** Increasingly, the people we write about use PowerPoint slide shows to explain issues to their peers and staffs. We can use those same slide shows (or develop shows of our own) to explain the issues to our users. Keep in mind that most PowerPoints are accompanied by a person explaining the context of what you are seeing or connecting some dots. Consider whether you need some audio or notes to accompany the slide show or some extra slides that provide that context or connection.

**Consider maps.** Geography is critical to many stories. An interactive map can place a story in perspective, with pins showing what happened where, with each pin linking to more detail about what happened there. You can turn a map into a timeline by numbering the pins.

**Consider simulations.** Many of your users grew up on video games. Your stories will be more meaningful online if you can offer simulations that help them try their skill at something you are writing about or use a game-like simulation to experience it more richly. You may not have to produce the simulations yourself. If the military or a corporation uses a simulation for a topic you're writing about, see if you can get something to use online to help tell the story.

**Consider animations.** Computer animations can illustrate processes, such as how a new industrial process will work or how a disaster happened. Again, you don't have to produce the animations yourself. But if you can obtain an animation, it would enhance the multimedia presentation of your story.

**Consider source documents.** Source documents let your audience dig into a story as deeply as they want. Some will be satisfied with your quote or two from the report or the indictment. Others will want to read the full document themselves. Whether as pdfs of paper documents or as links to online documents, add credibility and depth to your stories by adding the source documents. Don't just do this with official documents. Love letters, old newspaper clippings and private journals can add depth and credibility to your stories as well.

**Consider your archives.** Many stories are really just chapters. Give your stories context by providing links to previous stories on this issue or related topics.

## **Consider interactivity**

You can turn your user into a participant by making your story interactive. You can do this on at least four levels:

- Involve participants in your reporting.
- Involve participants in telling the story.
- Help participants to personalize the story.

- Engage participants in the continuation of the story.

**Consider crowd-sourcing.** Crowd-sourcing helps you connect with participants who know what you're trying to find out in your reporting. Use the web site to connect with people who know something about the topic you're writing about. Sometimes you will need to word the invitation carefully, so you're not passing along rumors or tipping off competition. Invite your users to tell you what they know. Crowd-sourcing can help you connect with confidential sources or obtain official documents in an investigation. Crowd-sourcing can provide quick answers on a breaking news story. Crowd-sourcing can gather stories for a light feature. You can use the product of crowd-sourcing in multiple ways:

- Invite people to e-mail you and you check out their tips and use the best stuff you can verify in your story.
- Invite people to share their information directly online and their discussion supplements your story.
- Invite the open online discussion and mine the best tips from that, using what you can verify in the story.

**Consider a wiki or discussion thread.** If you're covering an event or issue, you could invite participants to tell their own story – either as a standalone or to supplement your own coverage – either as a wiki that each user adds to and edits what has been written before or as a discussion forum, where each contribution adds to what has come before.

**Consider a live online chat.** Either the reporter or a source (or both) could make your story interactive by doing a live online chat with your audience.

**Consider databases and calculators.** Users can personalize your stories when you provide databases that allow them to find the information that applies most closely to them. For instance, if the city approves an increase in property taxes, an online calculator (with a link to the assessor's site to help check valuation) can help each user decide how much her own increase will be. Or if you're writing about falling test scores in schools, a database can allow each user to find the numbers for his children's schools. Or you can get some sample questions and let users take the test (or part of it) themselves. Interactive maps are an effective database. The user can click on her neighborhood and get the information that means the most to her.

**Consider discussion forums.** If you've produced a good story, it should draw reaction from your audience. By establishing a forum for discussion, you allow the audience to continue the story with their opinions, experiences and questions. This may generate tips for follow-up stories. Or it may be a discussion that deepens the experience, however long it lasts.

**Consider polls.** A poll lets the audience participate in the story by adding their opinions. Be careful not to present an online poll as scientific. It measures passion more than it measures opinion. And all it measures is the digital audience.

## Add value with links

Because newspapers like to keep all eyes on our products, outbound links are contrary to our culture. We want people looking at our products, rather than going elsewhere. We need to change that thinking. The value of outbound links made Google the most successful business of the Internet age. You inch toward becoming the Google of your community by providing links to other materials that answer users' questions about your community. Make link journalism a part of your newsroom culture. We always have valued context, so this shouldn't be too big a stretch. In any story, consider how you can add value with links:

**Don't just quote, link.** If you're quoting a blogger, document, press release, news story (anything that exists elsewhere on the web), add a link to the source so readers can read the full piece if they wish. When you link, you never quote out of context.

**Link to background sources.** If you're writing about a person or organization with a web site, link to the site, so curious users can learn more background than you'll include in the story.

**Link to other media.** Again, this is countercultural in most news organizations. But if you link to the competition, you have everything they do. Sure, you want to beat them, but you also want to be the place where your audience can come for everything on a topic, so link to other sources.

**Link to social media.** Much of the story is being told outside the professional media. Aggregate those stories by linking to Twitter feeds, Flickr photos, YouTube videos, Facebook groups, personal blogs and other places where the public is helping you tell this story. Of course, some of these links will lead you to valuable sources you'll want to contact directly for some of your reporting.

**Link to your archives.** You often will have stories in your archives that will provide background and context to the story you're writing. Link to them, even if you have to resurrect them online. Remember to link to visual content as well as stories. Photos, videos, graphics and maps in your archives might provide context.

## Consider alternate story forms

Many stories or parts of stories are told most effectively in forms other than the traditional string of paragraphs. This is as true in digital storytelling as it is in print, and you can make many alt forms work effectively by adapting the approach to each platform. Consider whether all or part of your story should be told in one or a combination of the forms described below. Or develop a new alt form. An alternate story form can be a sidebar to a main story in the traditional paragraph format. Or the alternate form can become *the* story, either as a standalone or with the string of paragraphs as the sidebar.

## Information layers

**Timelines.** A timeline places a specific event or series of events in context with other events. This can be simple text or you can turn it into a graphic or perhaps illustrate with photos of some of the events. You can combine a timeline with a map, showing how an event unfolded through space and time. An online timeline can be interactive, with extra layers of information at points on the timeline as you click on them or roll your cursor over them.

**Chronologies.** A chronology details how an event unfolded. A chronology can be all text or can tie into a map or diagram that explains key steps. If you don't have a map or diagram, photos of key people or events might enhance the chronology. Again, you can make an interactive chronology online that includes layered information.

**Glossaries.** A glossary explains terminology relating to a particular issue. This doesn't absolve the writer from explaining some terms in context in the story, but gives an opportunity for more detailed definitions. Again, visual elements can be part of a graphic, with photos or drawings of some of the words defined. As with other layers, an online glossary can be interactive – click on the hyperlinked word in the text and you get the definition, illustration, audio, etc.

**Use-It Boxes.** Pull out useful information for the reader into a box that attracts the eye quickly. This may be something the user will be looking for later when she returns to the story. Use-it's, also called go-and-do boxes, might have date and time of an event, ticket price, location, a phone number for more information, how to make donations, how to volunteer, who can participate, web sites, etc. Consider how the user might act in response to your story. If you write a story that moves the user to act, put the information that tells her how to act in one place that's easy to find.

**What's-next box.** Especially in a running story, consider a box telling the audience what to expect next. This is essential in a series. Online, this can include links to previous stories.

**Tables, charts and graphs.** If you have more than two related numbers, consider presenting them in a table, chart or graph. Numbers almost always work better in one of these formats than in prose. The more numbers you use, the more important that you simplify them in one of these forms. Again, you can make these interactive online.

**Statistics.** Does your story include statistical information that can be presented in an understandable typographical table as a separate element, such as a box score?

**Databases.** Consider whether the story should include a searchable database online, allowing the user to find the information that helps her personalize the story and find the most meaningful information to her. A database can be a onetime feature that accompanies the story or it can become part of the "evergreen" content that increases

your web site's value. Sometimes you can program a database so it updates automatically as new information is posted online elsewhere.

**Cast of characters.** If the story involves several people, consider a separate element with mug shots of the characters and thumbnail sketches. This can be simple biographical information or it can include fun facts that don't really fit into the narrative but add to the character development of the total package. This is another element that can be interactive online.

**Bio box.** If you're writing about a particular newsmaker, consider a box with some basic information – age, education, occupation, family and perhaps a fun fact or two. With both the bio box and the cast of characters, some overlap with the story is inevitable and desirable. But exact duplication is a waste of your space and the user's time. Make the bio box or cast of characters mostly new information. Mug shots or even a wide candid shot add to a cast of characters or a bio box. (A note about the "boxes" referred to here: Whether you actually box them with a border is a matter of design style for your paper. If the borders of your box are white space, call them windows or breakouts if you prefer. Or make up your own terminology that works for your staff.) The online bio box can include links to video or slide shows about the newsmaker.

**Fact boxes.** Sometimes, especially with a complicated story, a fact box summarizing key points is helpful to the reader.

**By the numbers.** You can bring several disparate facts about a story together in an easy and eye-catching way in a "by the numbers" box that features the numbers in large type and explains them in smaller type.

**Comparisons.** These can be informative, comparing features of an existing law with a pending bill, or humorous, listing what's in and what's out. You can do a comparison as simple text side-by-side in two columns. But some photos or other art will make it more appealing. Again, the online comparison can be interactive, with layers that provide greater depth.

**Grids.** A grid can relate facts in multiple ways, either as a comparison or to tell stories of multiple events in parallel fashion. For instance, you can recount turn-of-the-screw meetings in grid fashion, with a different column for each board or commission and with rows identifying name of the board, actions taken and what's next. Grids are great for comparisons when you have more than two items being compared or more than two ways of comparing items. The grid can be an interactive database.

**Lists.** Lists almost always work better as a separate element, even if it's just text, than in the prose of a story. Online the list often works well as a database.

**Pull quotes.** Does a particular quote seem to sum up the story? Consider highlighting it in a box, perhaps with a photo of the speaker. Pull quotes often are just design devices.

Use them for more than just breaking up the type. Find the quote that helps summarize or tell the story. The online version of the pull-quote can be an audio or video clip.

**Fresh quotes.** Don't just highlight duplicated quotes that you pull from the story. You might present some quotes – either from characters in the story or person-in-the-street quotes from a news event – that stand on their own, giving the reader another layer of the story. These can run with or without photos of the speakers. You can also use quotes – fresh or from the story – as reefers. Again, this technique works online as well. Use a video or audio clip that supplements the story, rather than repeating it (though it might share some basic facts for the user who just consumes one version of the story).

**Rails and strips.** You can pull a mix of these different elements together in a vertical rail or a horizontal strip that will help frame your package and give the browsing reader several layers to draw her into the story. In the online presentation, a rail is a good place for links that allow the user to choose where to go more deeply into the story.

**Sidebars.** Remember the old standby of sidebars. You can use a sidebar for any of a variety of reasons: Perhaps the information would disrupt the flow of the main story. Or maybe it would get lost in the main story and really deserves its own headline. A sidebar doesn't have to be displayed as a story. Consider whether it would work in one of these other formats discussed here, such as a fact box or a Q&A.

**Q&A's.** Some information works better in question-and-answer format than in a string of paragraphs.

## Visual layers

**Staff photographs.** Can a photographer shoot pictures of the people, places and events of the story? How can photos help tell the story? How can they draw the user's attention to the story? Can they tell the story themselves? The photo staff should always be part of the early planning of a story.

**Official photographs.** If you can't shoot live photographs, seek official photographs of some of the people you are writing about.

**Archival photographs.** Check your files, paper and electronic, for historical photographs that may tell part of the story. Historical photographs can make a strong video in combination with a character's voice telling a story. The talking head telling the story is not nearly as effective.

**Donated photographs.** Ask the characters you interview for photographs they have taken that might show events or places where you were not present. Seek candid photographs and mug shots of dead or missing people you write about. Seek youthful photographs of people you write about, if your story will deal with that period in their lives.

**User-contributed photographs.** Does the story present an opportunity to seek photographs from the audience that will help tell the story? Users can help tell the story in print or online in lots of ways. If you are covering a spot-news event that happened before your staff could reach the scene, you can ask online whether any users shot timely photos. If you are covering a communitywide event such as a storm or a big event such as a parade or festival, users can add their pictures to your staff's professional photography. Invite the audience to submit their photos online.

**Illustrations.** A staff photographer or artist might be able to create an effective illustration to help tell the story and attract the eye. Or a character might be able to provide illustrations done by others.

**Artist's renderings.** When your community is planning a new building or project, the architect, engineer or developer usually can provide an illustration showing how it will look when finished.

**Maps.** A simple locator map might help the user understand where an event took place. Or a complex map might show how and where an event unfolded. An interactive map lets people contribute their sightings of an event.

**Diagrams.** If the user might wonder "how did that happen?" or "how does that work?" consider a diagram to provide a clearer answer than you can in prose. Again, you can produce a staff-generated diagram or you might come across a diagram in your reporting that you can use with permission and credit. Consider whether you could do a computer animation.

### **Helpful resources**

You should be able to find most of these with a quick search, but if you have the hard-copy version of this handout and would like to check the links, email me and I'll send you an electronic copy with the hyperlinks.

Steve Myers' [Multimedia: An adolescent but no longer an orphan](#)

Steve Buttry's [Google doesn't fear outbound links; neither should you](#)

Scott Karp's [Links as News, Links as Reporting](#)

Yoni Greenbaum's [Same old content doesn't cut it for online reporting](#)

### **Multimedia examples**

GazetteOnline: [A Broken Bridge](#)

GazetteOnline: [Year of the River](#)

GazetteOnline: [Boulevard of Broken Dreams](#) slide show

GazetteOnline: [Boulevard of Broken Dreams](#) video

GazetteOnline: [JumpStart database](#)

GazetteOnline: [Disaster maps](#)

GazetteOnline: [IowaFloodStories](#)

GazetteOnline: [It Takes a Village](#)

Floodlist.com: [Relocated businesses database](#)  
Startribune.com: [13 seconds in August: The 35W bridge collapse](#)  
Nola.com: [“Last Chance” interactive graphic on vanishing Louisiana coastline](#)  
DesMoinesRegister.com: [Parkersburg tornado: the aftermath](#)  
WashingtonPost.com: [Pearls Before Breakfast](#) (and here’s the [funny follow-up column](#))  
RockyMountianNews.com: [Final Salute](#)  
News-Press.com: [Cape Coral Water & Sewer Assessments](#)  
[YouTube - Did You Know 2.0](#)  
[YouTube - Web 2.0 ... The Machine is Us-ing Us](#)  
RRStar.com: [Family, friends wait to hear from NIU loved ones](#)  
CollegiateTimes.com: [Virginia Tech Shootings](#)