



# PUSHING FOR SOPHISTICATION AND POLISH

**A**ware of a broadening in demand beyond the still image, World Press Photo organised its first ever multimedia contest. On the eve of the Awards Ceremony, when the winners of World Press Photo's multimedia competition were announced, we spoke with Nancy Donaldson, a multimedia producer at *The New York Times*. Donaldson was involved with two award-winning productions: *The Home Front*\* (first prize, linear category) and *A Year at War*\*\* (third prize, interactive category).

**Carly Diaz:** During the judging, many discussions revolved around definitions of multimedia. What is your definition?

**Nancy Donaldson:** Multimedia is technically anything that involves multiple types of content. The multimedia team at *The New York Times* consists of producers, of visual narratives and animations, designers and programmers. Technically we're all multimedia producers, but the skill set is very diverse. The World Press Photo contest broke it down into interactive and linear categories. I think there definitely is, and should be, a distinction between more in-depth packages and single narratives. But there needs to be visual storytelling in terms of photography and video in each.

**CD:** What distinguishes single narratives from in-depth packages?

**ND:** Linear productions give the reader guidance. There is only one way to experience the story. With interactive productions, the idea is to give people a sampling of what's there. In our production *A Year at War*, about a US battalion in Afghanistan, you can meet the troops, spend time with certain soldiers and see their opinions and experience change over the course of a year. But to get the full story, you don't have to do that. You can also look at the narratives describing the whole battalion going off to Afghanistan or the commander talking about one mission. Interactive productions give the reader more avenues to go down and dig deeper.

**CD:** Does the freedom in navigation not entail a risk that people will miss the best starting or

**Nancy Donaldson, a multimedia producer at *The New York Times***

**ending point, or a critical part of the story?**

**ND:** We discussed at length whether we could assume people had seen the earlier pieces or whether we had to give a full explanation, even though we explained it two videos ago. I think it's clear that there are larger storytelling pieces and that you can dig deeper into characters and experience certain moments. Our aim is that each piece offers enough for everyone to get something out of it. The more intrigued they are, the better.

**CD:** What do you see as the necessary elements of an effective production?

**ND:** I think strong characters and a narrative arc are important. You have to be very careful to present your story in a way that's engaging, both visually and from a storytelling standpoint.

**CD:** Is there one medium that you consider the backbone of multimedia?

**ND:** I think the audio narrative is the backbone. People are much more willing to watch something that photographers may not find very strong visually than to listen to audio that's hard to hear. The threshold for listening to bad audio is much higher.

**CD:** As a producer, can you describe the process of creating a multimedia piece, from idea to publication?

**ND:** The most important lesson I've learned is that the earlier you have the right team in place, the better. Even before the photographer goes out to shoot, you should involve the multimedia producer. The writer, photographer and producer should all be on the same page when they go into the reporting process. Usually, we start with a conversation about the story and the reporting trip. Then we create a plan around what we expect to find. I think it's really beneficial for me to stay in New York while the photographer reports back from the field. That way photographers have the unbiased feedback of someone who is not experiencing the same things. When they come back, we have a conversation about what they gathered and what we think the story will be. I then start working through the interviews, pulling them into a narrative structure. After that, we keep meeting through all the various steps and edits down to the last minute, to make sure it represents what they found in the field. The process works best when all parties are involved. The heavy lifting for the photographer starts when they go out to report, and the heavy lifting for the producer is when the photographer gets back. But it's really important to be together every step of the way.

**CD:** What role do you see photography playing in multimedia?

**ND:** I think photography has a lot of strengths. It gives people insight into the issues within the story and can be very emotional. The shooting style is perhaps different when photographers are shooting for a visual narrative than when they are creating images for a magazine or newspaper, which are not necessarily published in chronological order.

**CD:** Speaking of the shooting style, can you describe the way a photographer works in the field for a multimedia piece?

**ND:** A lot of photographers I work with are either

new or almost new to shooting video. Often they are more accustomed to shooting stills for audio slideshows. For photographers, this is still a relatively new medium and it's important to stress visual variety, both in terms of angle and depth. You don't need one shot that tells the whole story. For a visual narrative – that ultimately becomes the form of video – you have to shoot more transitions, details and scene setters. They are really important to thread a piece together and give a sense of place, movement and progress.

**CD:** Which new ways of storytelling do long-form narratives open up?

**ND:** The longer narratives enable us to evolve a story over time, as things develop. We are just finishing the last part of *A Year at War*. We're surprised where some of the characters are, what has happened in their lives and what they have learned. It's been really interesting to see where they have ended up, to compare their initial objective with what they found when they got there, and to say how things played out and how they've measured success. A longer narrative allows you to give more, check back in and update people. It also allows you to let people probe deeper into certain issues and characters.

**CD:** How do you think the creation of multimedia productions has changed over the years?

**ND:** On a fundamental level, bandwidth and the ability to deliver a high quality product have changed a lot. This has enabled people to take multimedia to the next level. It took a while for print photography to evolve into multimedia. They are different things, although they're based on many of the same principles. Also, people's interests and understanding of what you can do with the web and with photojournalism – beyond individual stills – was part of the learning process. Audio slideshows were probably the first visual narratives on the web. In my first three years at *The New York Times*, the main focus was still on those. But then there was video and people began mixing the two. Today the main focus is blending video with still images and doing interviews on video.

**CD:** Where do you think multimedia is headed? What would you like to see happen next?

**ND:** My interest lies in the more in-depth, longer form, like mini documentaries on the web. I'm not hoping that the medium itself will change. But maybe the platform will, so it can be delivered on iPads and iPhones. TV shows and movies are now online. Everything becomes more of an equal playing field, which increases the level of competition and expectation on the web. People will continue to be pushed to make more sophisticated and more polished productions. As to what the ultimate platform for these pieces is, and where they should and will go, I think the lines will begin to blur. The medium will move along as more people engage and learn to shoot and produce multimedia.

\* *The Home Front* is the story of two boys in the US who struggle to adjust when their father, a single dad and US soldier, is deployed to Afghanistan and they are sent to live with relatives.

\*\* *A Year at War* examines the year-long deployment of one US battalion in Afghanistan. See <http://www.worldpressphoto.org/multimediacontest>