Online news creates space, opportunity for graphics

While online journalism means a lot of different things for different people, one thing it has meant relatively universally is more space.

The advent of online has led to room for more graphics, and the ability to create more exciting graphics, said Steve Duenes, graphics director for the New York Times.

"Generally, journalism is about answering the reader's questions," Duenes said. And graphics can be a particularly efficient way of doing so.

At the New York Times, creating graphics can mean anything from making a simple locator map for a world news piece to engineering a partially animated video explaining a specific baseball pitcher's signature throw.

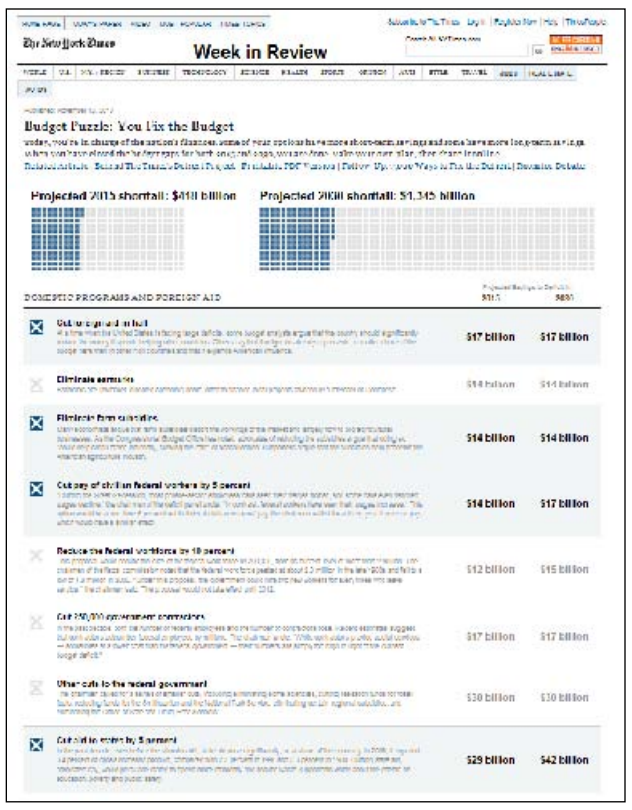
Even more in the spirit of new media, graphics can now be interactive. For example, a graphic published Nov. 13 of 2010 allowed viewers to choose areas in government spending to reduce and see how that would play out over the next five to 20 years.

For the graphic designers themselves, journalism and researching skills are still integral, as they are expected to find their own information to create the graphics. Along with this, an eye for design is still important.

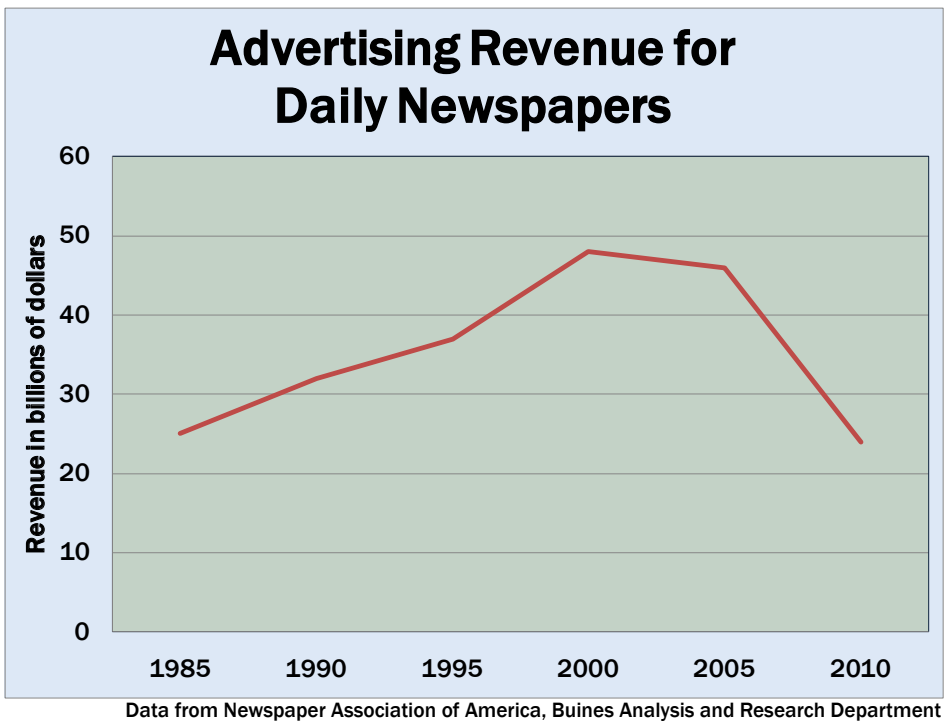
The one thing that is changing is the need for graphic designers with computer and html skills.

While graphics are coming into a more prominent role, in most cases they still act a supplementary material.

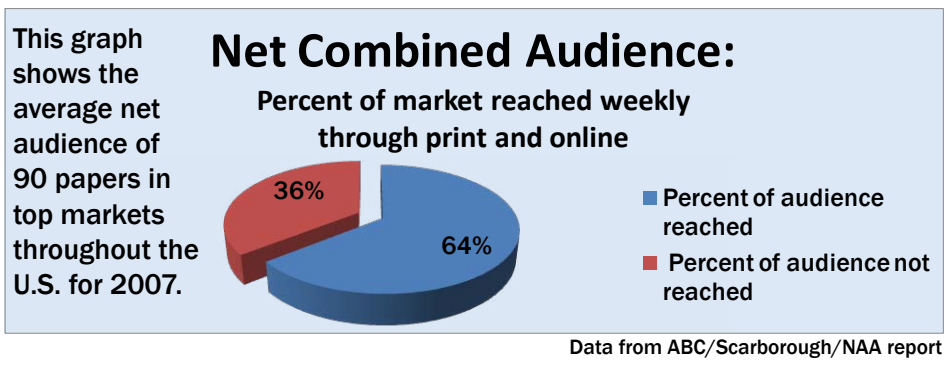
"Graphics can convey a lot and the web obviously is a visual medium, but I don't think that words are going away," Duanes said. "The balance is changing a little bit."



Screenshot of New York Times interactive graphic "Budget Puzzle: You fix the Budget." The graphic can be found at http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/11/13/weekinreview/deficits-graphic.html.



Data from Newspaper Association of America, Buines Analysis and Research Department



Data from ABC/Scarborough/NAA report

Technological advances

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Newspapers are no longer only a text and photo based media source. Instead, video and audio are becoming more and more common companions to written stories on the web.

Of the 450 employees at WNET, a public broadcasting station in New York, 10 percent work on web, WNET vice president Robert Clauser said.

Along with the evolution of platforms used, the relationship of the journalist to news consumers is changing. According to Sreenivasen, the audience is now a part of the story. Because of this, social media is becoming increasingly important to journalists.

Journalists used to be "gatekeepers;" they would determine what news the public saw and did not see. No longer is this the case. Many people now receive their news via social media. Instead of reading what editors chose to put in the paper, they read what their friends link to, or about the topics that friends are talking about.

"We have not even begun to understand the power of Facebook," Sreenivasen said.

Facebook can help journalists find what is new, connect in new ways with audiences, bring eyeballs to their work, and build a brand online, Sreenivasen said.

Media impact

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The good news is audiences are not completely abandoning traditional news sources.

"A lot of people might imagine that old media are losing their audience and that people are moving to partisan sources," said Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism. "Our research would suggest that's not true."

In fact, if you include people who look at news online, the total audience for newspapers is steady, and for many outlets increasing, Rosenstiel said.

Robert Naylor, director of career development at the Associated Press, said that the place of the "legacy news sources" in today's media climate is as the credible news provider.

"We want to report first, but we want to report the correct information," he said.

Kerger holds a similar view.

"The most valuable asset that we have is our brand," she said.

While that credible brand may be attracting an online audience, unfortunently equivalent audience doesn't necessarily mean equivalent revenue. Most news services haven't yet worked out how to make online profitable.

In the meantime, this means they are working with smaller budgets in the midst of trying to expand the outlets for their coverage. Or, as Naylor put it: they now have to do more with fewer people.

"The journalists that survive in the business these days are the ones that have the broadest set of skills and the deepest set of skills," Naylor said.

Organizations are in a strange place right now, often going through layoffs while at the same time hiring, Kerger said. So, even as the news business itself diversifies, individual employees often have to do the same. Skills in writing often need to be matched with skills in recording and editing video and audio, or with web related skill sets such as knowing HTML. While the ability to adapt is important, some of the same skills that served journalists well in the time of old media will carry over into new media.

"The ability to look at information, synthesize it, and portray it to different audiences will keep you employed for the rest of your life," said Sree Sreenivasen, a new media expert, professor, and a dean of Columbia's Journalism School.

Wisdom from the experts

"The best of journalism is about changing the world."

- Sree Sreenivasen
New Media Expert
Columbia University

"What really matters is not what sells television."

- Brian Lamb
Founder and President of CSPAN

"One of the things I worry about a lot is that people like you will shy away from journalism as a career."

- Paula Kerger
President of PBS

"We believe that news should not be defined as what powerful people say and do."

- Janine Jackson
Program director of Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting.

"Part of being a journalist is you have to push yourself."

- Mike Hoyt
Editor of Columbia Journalism Review

"I think the key thing is you have to have some level of integrity to build trust and confidence in the source. You have to be tenatcious, you have to be smooth."

- Mike Webb
Director of communication for ProPublica