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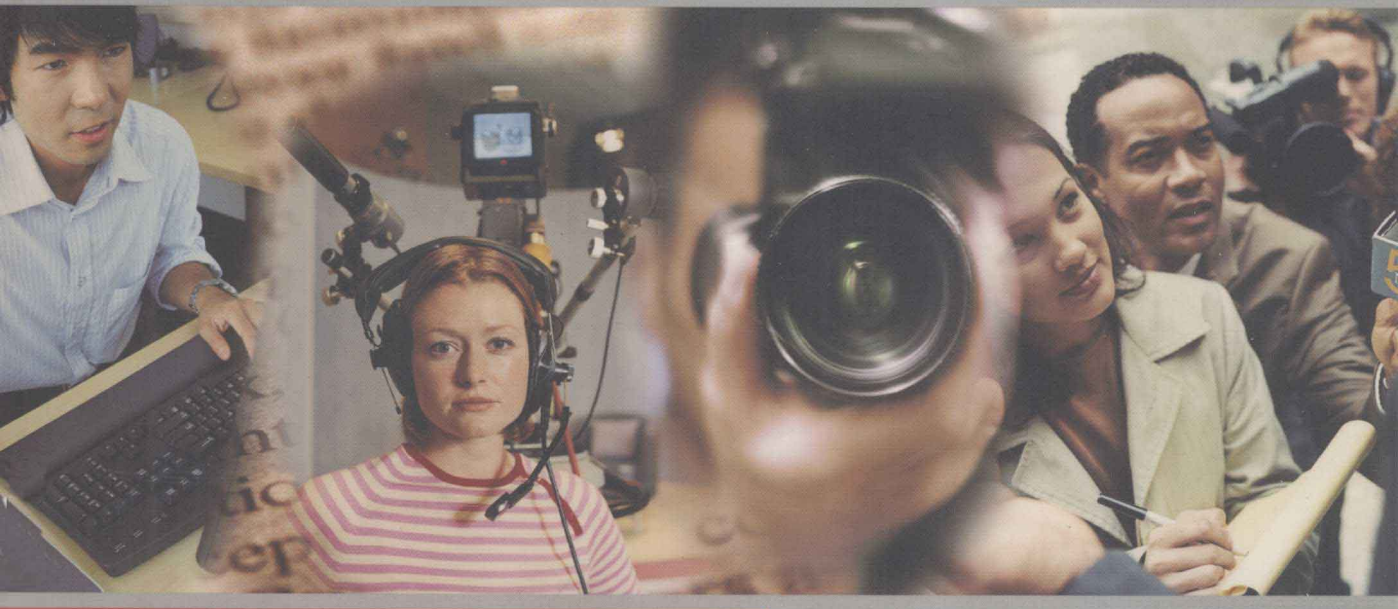
How to Create Multimedia News Packages



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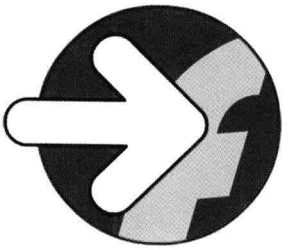

Flash Journalism

How to Create Multimedia News Packages

Mindy McAdams

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Teachers of multimedia journalism will love this book. Mindy McAdams has written a refreshingly thoughtful and accessible book about how to create Flash journalism, beginning with introductions to basic drawing tools and building to instructions on how to create photo slideshows with sound and other more advanced techniques. McAdams provides step-by-step directions along with an excellent reference set of first-rate Flash journalism sites.
—Janice Castro, Assistant Dean/Director, Graduate Journalism Programs, Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University

Flash Journalism: How to Create Multimedia News Packages *fills a technical void in the area of multimedia journalism and mass communication education. There are abundant choices for teaching Flash for beginners and moderate producers, but this book focuses on the tools you will need to produce interactive and visual narratives.* Flash Journalism *will surely be a companion book for my own teaching in the lab and classroom.*
—Andrew DeVigal, Assistant Professor, San Francisco State University

What makes Flash Journalism *stand out is that it contextualizes the Flash technology to journalistic practices. Its six case studies provide readers valuable opportunities to see how pros in the real world use Flash to present news. On top of the case studies, the book's tutorial chapters, in no way a duplication of the existing Flash tutorial books, enable readers to grasp the technology instantly and solidly. Many Action-Scripts in the book could produce elegant effects for journalistic purposes and also save time. This is a must-own book for any mass media learners and practitioners who are interested in the future of news presentation.*
—Dr. Edgar Huang, Associate Professor of Informatics, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

Flash opens up doors to so many multimedia possibilities—from creating video games to making Web-based applications. It can be difficult to decide what code to spend your time learning for a project, and what code isn't necessary at all for what you are trying to build. Mindy McAdams presents the core information that a storyteller needs. Her step-by-step examples are a guide for those who set out to create multimedia projects of journalistic value.
—Jayson Singe, NeonSky.com

To the journalism students at the University of Florida who asked so many questions about Flash

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Acknowledgments

This book could not have been written without the advice, support, and ideas of many people in journalism and in journalism education. The online editors and producers, graphic designers, and photojournalists who helped and encouraged this effort number in the dozens, but Andrew DeVigal deserves special mention for building and maintaining Interactive Narratives.org, as does Joe Weiss, not only for teaching all of us with his blog (*http://www.joeweiss.com*) but also for teaching Dave Cone, who in turn taught me so much in 2003. Tom Kennedy, of washingtonpost.com, an alumnus of the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications, inspired me more than he realized during a dinner conversation in 2002. I also tip my hat to R. Scott Horner and Don Wittekind, both of the South Florida *Sun-Sentinel* and the Society for News Design.

All the Flash journalists whom I interviewed for the case studies in this book did me a great favor by being so generous with their time and sharing so much information. I owe them a hearty thank you and my deepest appreciation for their knowledge.

Fellow educators who spurred me on include Rosental Calmon Alves, of the University of Texas at Austin; David Carlson, my colleague at the University of Florida; Janice Castro, of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University; Paul Grabowitz, of the University of California at Berkeley; Chris Harvey, of the University of Maryland; Janet Kolodzy, of Emerson College, Boston; Thom Lieb of Towson University, Maryland; Mary McGuire, of Carleton University, Ottawa; Larry Pryor, of the USC Annenberg School for Communication; Laura Ruel, of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; and Mike Ward of the University of Central Lancashire. My dean, Terry Hynes, encouraged me to write the book I wanted to write, and my department chair, William McKeen, always remained open-minded about my teaching Flash as part of journalism. David Carlson never failed to listen and offer his expert advice on any ideas I had about online journalism.

Stéphane Richer of Noise Communications, Montréal, helped me learn a great deal about ActionScript in a very short time, especially how to exploit the "_root.onEnterFrame" handler.

Craig Lee, the Web administrator for the College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida, patiently tested, did troubleshooting, and found answers for me on many occasions. He also drove all the way to Miami once so we could attend a three-day Macromedia seminar (and he showed me where I-95 ends). Kristen Landreville, a graduate student at the University of Florida, assisted me with innumerable details in the final stages of the book.

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The annual conference of the Online News Association has provided a strong connection among practitioners of and educators in online journalism since its founding in 1999. While other organizations concentrate on the business side, ONA always points to the journalism. I owe many of my relationships in this profession to my membership in ONA.

Thanks are also due in large measure to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which endowed the Knight Chair in Journalism at the University of Florida and enabled me to enter the teaching profession and learn from the wonderful students here. The students' willingness to test-drive these lessons and provide feedback enabled me to refine and improve them considerably. The students have earned a heaping helping of credit for everything that is useful in this book.

Mindy McAdams
July 2004

Introduction

Flash is not simple, but you have mastered complex skills before this.

With this book, you should be able to learn how to create online journalism packages using graphical and interactive elements to tell a story. The goal is for you to learn a full repertoire of Flash skills using only this book and the program itself, even if you have never looked at Flash before. This book assumes you are generally comfortable using software, especially some kind of graphics program such as Photoshop; in other words, no time is wasted explaining how to open menus and select tools from a toolbar.

This book does not attempt to tell you everything about Flash. The idea is to tell you what you really *need* to know, in an order that makes sense. Too many Flash books seem to assume you want to know every arcane command available. Why would you? You just need to get the job done. You don't have time to read about sixteen tools when you actually need to use only six. You need to know how Flash handles photos specifically, not just any kind of image. You need to know how to make sound buttons work and not be told that's outside the scope of the book you're reading.

I wrote this book because there was no book like it. A number of online journalists, photojournalists, and journalism educators were talking about using and teaching Flash, a software program produced by Macromedia. They liked what they saw online—certain kinds of moving, visual content that really held their attention and didn't take a ridiculously long time to download—but they had discovered that Flash is not quite as easy to learn as some other programs.

Having had good luck with teaching myself many software programs over the years, I downloaded a free trial version of Flash and went to work. I discovered what others had already learned: Flash is not simple. It seemed especially hard to figure out how to do the journalistic things I wanted to do. Books and online tutorials did not address the problems I needed to solve.

I talked to many professionals who were already using Flash successfully, spent hundreds of hours on the many online forums where generous Flash developers share their knowledge, read at least a dozen books, and completed an online course and a traditional workshop. I used what I had learned to teach Flash to a number of journalism students, and they taught me what various people find difficult about learning Flash—not everyone gets stuck on the same things. That led me to write this book so that journalism students, educators, and professionals could skip a lot of the time-consuming searching and questioning I had to do.

What's in This Book

Whether you are an online editor, a photojournalist, a graphic designer, an educator, or a college student, this book allows you to start your learning journey in whatever way works best for you. If you're a hands-on person, go straight to Part II. If you're more likely to manage the people building Flash projects than to build them yourself, start with Part III. If you want to understand why Flash is a unique tool for journalism, begin with Part I.

In Part I, you'll see why Flash journalism constitutes a new form of storytelling that is distinct from print, broadcast, and much of today's online journalism. Although Flash journalism packages often combine familiar elements from photojournalism, radio journalism, and infographics, the combinations result in something that has not existed before. You'll get an overview of what Flash can do that other Web authoring tools cannot do as well as some caveats about weaknesses of Flash, and you'll learn why Flash has become so widely used online in the past few years.

In Part II, you'll learn how to make things in Flash. Ten self-directed lessons can be completed on your own or as part of a course or workshop. The first five lessons provide the fundamentals needed to create any kind of content in Flash, from drawing and animation to creating buttons that control what happens in the completed Flash presentation on the Web. Lesson 6 introduces a crucial building block of Flash content, the movie clip symbol, which allows you to save time and energy by reusing selected animated sequences. The last four lessons build on the first six to take you beyond the basics to an intermediate level of Flash know-how. Those four lessons are particularly relevant to Flash journalism, because they cover photographs, audio, text elements, and controllable slideshows with sound.

If you work through all ten lessons, you will be able to start building professional-quality Flash journalism packages right away. Remember, your proficiency will increase with each package you create—so start simple, and let your ambitions keep pace with your growing skill set.

To get maximum value from the ten lessons, do everything in the numbered exercises on your own computer, using either Flash MX or Flash MX 2004. If you get stuck (or even if you don't), you can download the relevant FLA files from the book's Web site (*http://flashjournalism.com/book/*) and see exactly how each file is constructed. You can also look at the finished examples there, without downloading them.

The lessons are designed to be used in sequence. Later lessons refer to earlier lessons, in case you have forgotten how to do something that has already been covered. If you feel the urge to jump ahead and work on a lesson out of sequence, don't be surprised if some parts of that lesson are confusing! Use the summary and conclusion at the end of each lesson to make sure you understand all the concepts and practices covered in that lesson. In my experience, students often want to go straight to the final lesson; then they get frustrated because they don't understand how to make things work. I'm advising you not to do that.

Remember, Flash is not simple. You must give yourself time to build your knowledge and skill through using Flash; this will help you avoid frustration.

In Part III, six case studies of professional Flash journalism packages will show you how these techniques are used and expanded upon by experienced designers and developers. The methods used to plan, design, and deliver the finished packages online are explained, as well as how the designers approach and solve problems that are typical in news organizations. Some advanced techniques referred to in these case studies are explained in the Tech Tips that accompany each one.

The case studies will not only help you understand how Flash journalism is done in the real world, but also inspire you to explore more complex techniques beyond those taught in this book's ten lessons. Many other books cover advanced Flash techniques; the designers and developers interviewed for this book agreed that you should expect to continue learning more about Flash, no matter how much you already know.

In the Afterword, you'll see what can be speculated about coming developments in Flash journalism. The multimedia producers and journalists

who were interviewed for the case studies are profiled in "About the Flash Journalists," and they offer advice for aspiring Flash experts.

In the Appendices, you'll learn three more advanced Flash authoring techniques: how to create a preloader for larger Flash files, how to build modular Flash packages made up of separate files, and how to put video into Flash.

Formatting Conventions Used

In the lesson instructions, certain words are rendered in **boldface** the first time they are used in any instruction. These include names of panels and tools, the Timeline, and the Stage. The intention is to focus your attention on what you should be doing.

ActionScript is shown in a `monospace serif font`; when you see this, you know you're supposed to type something in the Actions panel (or, in Lesson 10 only, in the external text file).

Throughout the lesson and the case studies, you'll see an icon in the margin whenever a corresponding file exists on the Web site for this book (*http://flashjournalism.com/book/*). Both the FLA and SWF files are available for you to download and study. You can click any link to a SWF to view it without downloading it.

Some content in the lessons is shown in a box with its own title. These sidebars can be read in any order. Other titled sections flow in line with the exercises and should be read in order.

If the instructions differ for the two versions of Flash covered in this book (MX and MX 2004), the text will say so. If no difference is pointed out, then the instructions work fine in either version.

A Note to Educators

If you are using the lessons in a computer lab, expect each of the first five lessons to take about one hour. Some students will complete them more quickly. The last five lessons will take longer, but most students will be able to complete each of them in about two hours. To reinforce the learning, you should assign additional projects that require the students to use the skills they learned in the lesson(s) for the week. An instructor's manual is available from Focal Press.

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I have been able to double up on the early lessons in a three-hour weekly lab, with students completing Lessons 1 and 2 and a small project in the first class, completing Lesson 3 as homework, and then uploading a Flash file to the Web as an out-of-class assignment. They can complete Lessons 4 and 5, and usually part of Lesson 6, during the next class meeting. As homework, they create and upload an animation controlled by scripted buttons.

In the third week, they can complete a photo slideshow with sound. On the Web site (*http://flashjournalism.com/educators/*), you'll find a condensed lesson using a template for a photo slideshow. Use this lesson if you need to fit the entire Flash instruction block into three weeks. Students with a higher interest level should be encouraged to work through Lessons 7–10 in their entirety.

I have also used these lessons in an intensive projects course in which students met twice a week for six weeks, completed all ten lessons during class, produced a written plan for an individual online project, and then used the remainder of the semester to complete the project. This course structure enabled the students to work though all ten lessons in five weeks.

A Note to Professionals

If you're already familiar with Photoshop and/or Dreamweaver, you can expect to complete Lessons 1–5 in five hours or less. Take a break before starting Lesson 6, and spend enough time on it to make sure you really understand how movie clips work; in day-to-day production, movie clips are the building blocks of every Flash movie. Lesson 6 should take between one and two hours to complete.

Lessons 7–10 can be completed in eight hours, depending on your stamina and your aptitude with software. In other words, you should be able to work through all ten lessons in a weekend. This is not the best approach for everyone, of course, but if you're ready to rip into Flash and really wrap your brain around it, you can start as a total beginner on Saturday morning and go back to work Monday morning as an intermediate Flash developer, ready to create engaging online Flash packages for your news organization. Just don't think you can take shortcuts and achieve that result: Use the whole set of ten lessons in order.

A Note to Everyone

One important thing for you to keep in mind: You don't have to do *everything* by yourself.

- If you're not a photojournalist, you will not be producing the great photos that are part of your Flash packages.
- If you're not a graphic artist, you will not be making the information graphics in your Flash packages.
- If you're not skillful with typography, color theory, and page design, you need to get advice on your Flash package designs. A graphic designer can help you clean up your layouts, making the package easier to use and visually appealing.
- If you're going to use sound in your Flash packages (beyond music loops and button clicks), then someone in your organization must be able to capture and edit audio effectively. At a newspaper there may be no one with those skills. Maybe you will decide to add those skills to your own repertoire; maybe you will talk to a radio journalist about partnering with your organization.
- Everyone's writing needs a good copy editor—even if you're a copy editor yourself. Don't shortchange your work by allowing errors in grammar, spelling, or facts to degrade its credibility.

Creating great Flash journalism is a team effort. If you're part of a news organization, you're already part of a team. Make sure you keep your perspective and get other people involved in your Flash packages. They don't need to learn Flash to contribute their photographs, graphics, audio, video, and writing. You can't force other people to give you their time, but you can make them *want* to do it by showing them how well their journalism works in this format.

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