theinteractivenews.org

# THE INTERACTIVE NEWS

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731

# Seed Proposal

Title: "The Interactive News"
Alexander R. Wilcox Cheek, M.Des. (P.I.)
12 month project

## Summary

The Interactive News seeks to establish a digital archive of pioneering online news media that is presently serving as a critical element in the transformation of news reporting. The archive will be a repository for interactive, generally long-form reporting where "rich media" compliments traditional textual narrative. The project aligns with Qatar's goals to become a transformative player in international journalism. Al Jazeera and the media establishment have experimented with online media over the past fifteen years and, while no new practices have been firmly established due to the ever-changing landscape of technology, multimedia and interactive engagements are now implemented by most major outlets. The Interactive News will become a comprehensive catalogue of especially powerful interactive reports (which currently get buried once the event has past), and a place to highlight innovations and best practices (which currently get highlighted on twitter when stories are published, but quickly fade). The project seeks to both catalogue this interesting period of transformation and serve as a guide for journalists, designers, data scientists, technologists, and publishers who are shaping the news industry.

## Background

The news business is no longer exclusively driven by executive editors and the ink their reporting staff puts to press at night. While the most reliable and often most deeply researched news is still composed by a professional organization, the landscape has become more "democratic" with the advent of social media. The dissemination of news has changed, and with it, the reader experience. The innovations around reader experience is what this project seeks to archive.

Using visual media and graphics to augment text (aside from photography) was pioneered in the 1970s by *The New York Times,* which often published black-and-white data graphics, and in the 1980s by the middle-market *USA TODAY*, which introduced color. Both publications came under deep scrutiny by Yale professor, statistician, and design critic Edward Tufte (1).
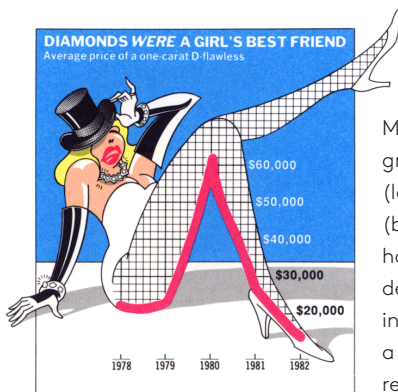


Misleading, tasteless, gimmicky graphics published by the *USA TODAY* (left) in 1982 and *The New York Times* (below) in 1978. The scrutiny received has shaped today's criticism and design of data graphics. Beginning in the 1990s, the *Times* has become a respected pioneer in multimedia reporting and design.
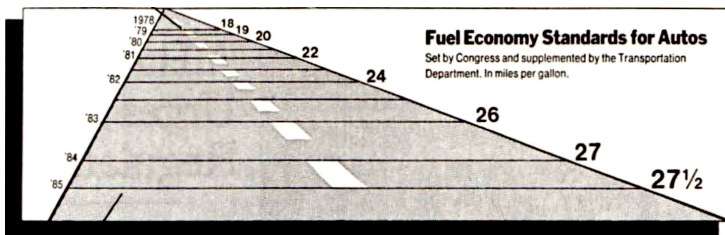


(1) Tufte, Edward R. "Graphical Integrity." The Visual Display of Quantitative Information. 2nd ed. Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 1983. 57, 61–63, 66–71. Print.

What One Word Describes Your Current State of Mind?

Throughout Election Day, NYTimes.com readers submitted the words that best described their moods. This page updated hourly with the most popular choices.
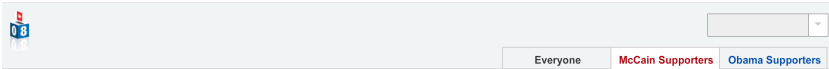


(2) Dance, Gabriel, Andrew Kueneman, and Aron Pilhofer. "Word Train." *The New York Times* 3 Nov. 2008, Online edition.

(3) Cheek, Alexander R. W., M.Des., and David S. Kaufer, "Design as a Means to Create Knowledge" Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University, 2009.

(4) Tufte, Edward R. "Corrupt Techniques in Evidence Presentations." In *Beautiful Evidence*. 1st ed. Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 2006. Print.

The visual presentations often distorted data as in the case of the *Times*, or were simply gimmicky distractions, as in the case of *USA TODAY*.

On November 4, 2008, the day of the United States presidential election between Obama and McCain, *The New York Times* prompted readers to describe, in one word, their current state of mind, followed by an input for the participant's political affiliation (2). It was one of the earliest popular and engaging examples of interactive media published online by the mainstream press.

"Rich media" can be defined as integrating interactive maps, data graphics, statistical tables, diagrams, video narratives, user-driven inputs, and other elements with text. These features are not just compliments to the reporting at hand, but augment and transform the way stories engage with the reader.

Consuming news media in these innovative formats generates greater understanding of the material by way of users interacting with and making connections between ideas partially through the curation of the content and partially through the self-guided experience. This was argued in my 2009 thesis paper, "Design as a Means to Create Knowledge" (3) where in interactions and connections brought users to deeper principles about the material at hand. Tufte has argued that for readers to better understand complex data, provide them with the entire data set presented clearly instead of cherrypicking or scoping it beforehand (4). In other words, to better communicate something, less is not necessarily better; in some cases one must present *more*. Transforming news media into new formats and forms shortens the distance to communication by engaging different types of readers in different types of ways and affords them greater learning possibilities through the interactions.

This project incorporates information and data presentation with interaction design in a context of design criticism, the same areas of my research and practice. It further advances my interests in dissolving the disciplinary boundaries of design, where communication design, interaction design, the "new media" artifact, and knowledge creation all blend together. Additional work of mine included 2009 consulting work with the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* on their organizational strategy and transition to digital media. It came on the heels of my research in 2008 at *The New York Times* as they built their interactive news team, shortly after merging their digital and print operations. The *Post-Gazette* project also led to a proposal and prototype of a digital news stand.

Above: Examples of data journalism and long-form multi-media reporting from the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Bloomberg*. Next Page: Data visualization and mapping in the *New York Times*.

## Broader Significance

To the design and journalism professions: Amongst journalists and media designers alike, new examples of interactive media that are published pique interest on social media. As the story fades from relevance, so does the digital artifact. The discussion that does take place is fragmented across twitter or perhaps a comments board, but has no central location. The Interactive News would serve as an archive, showcase, and hub for research and discussion amongst information and media design educators, design professionals, web developers, and journalists and publishers, all of whom have a shared experience of transition.

To scholarship and the University: As a design educator myself, I am regularly citing great examples of data-rich and interactive media online for their innovative techniques of data presentation, application of new web technologies, and ways in which the designers guide users through content. I can foresee the site becoming a place where educators can send students to learn, develop critiques, and mimic the work they see. For myself specifically, I plan to develop course projects that build content-rich interactive media like this. The thrust of the project showcases Carnegie Mellon's commitment to cross-disciplinary values, a university with top programs in design and information systems. The School of Design and Human-Computer Interaction Institute teach courses in interactive design for the web, information design (for interactions), typography, and more. The Program in Information Systems and the Department of English teach courses in content strategy, visual presentation, and web design.

To Education City and Qatar: The State of Qatar has demonstrated its commitment to a robust press through the creation of Al Jazeera and invitation of Northwestern University to Education City. Al Jazeera and Northwestern are both at the cusp of news media transformation. Like the reasons cited above, The Interactive News will serve as an archive of great rich media examples that reflect broader trends in the field. Many of the examples I have already earmarked for inclusion involve Middle East news specifically, incorporating video, maps, and diagrams of significant regional events. For our students at Education City and students of Middle Eastern affairs, these examples can prove invaluable to understanding current events. Virginia Commonwealth University, which teaches Graphic Design and Design Studies may also benefit as students study page layout, content structure, visual hierarchy, and data representation.

## Objectives and Outcomes

> To review existing sites that archive data visualization, media design, and product design (see preliminary data section). Outcome: to understand techniques of presentation, commenting, searching, and storing.

> To build wireframes for The Interactive News. Outcome: to have a specific development plan in place for a developer to work from (see appendix).

> To hire a developer, preferably a graduate of the CMU-Q I.S. program to build a content management system and the front-end user interface. Outcome: the product.

> To earmark content for inclusion, building a database of tags, metadata, screenshots, and links. Outcome: content for the site.

> To go live with the site and promote it through existing media outlets, professionals, peers, and colleagues. I expect to have an associated twitter account to push new additions. Outcome: Visibility and the generation of discussion and criticism.

## Proposal

Preliminary data: pages 6–19 showcase existing design archive sites, professional and homemade. These demonstrate a clear gap in resources available for the type of media I am specifying. They also show some successful methods of content strategy, presentation, and user engagement.

"ALL THE BOUNDARIES OF PRINT JUST FEEL SO INCREDIBLY OLD-FASHIONED NOW — THE NEED TO DO THINGS IN A CERTAIN SHAPE, IN A CERTAIN MIX, BY A CERTAIN TIME OF DAY IN THE WEEK."

TINA BROWN
IN *NEW YORK* MAGAZINE 11.18.2012

# Visual Complexity

## Manuel Lima

Visual Complexity was established in the mid-2000s by Manuel Lima, a respected critic and scholar in data visualization. A faculty member at Parsons The New School for Design, Lima has published two books as a result of this archive. The site has not been updated since 2014 but remains a rich source of content and the strongest influence for this project proposal. It serves as an example for how to tag, display, archive, and structure visual works.
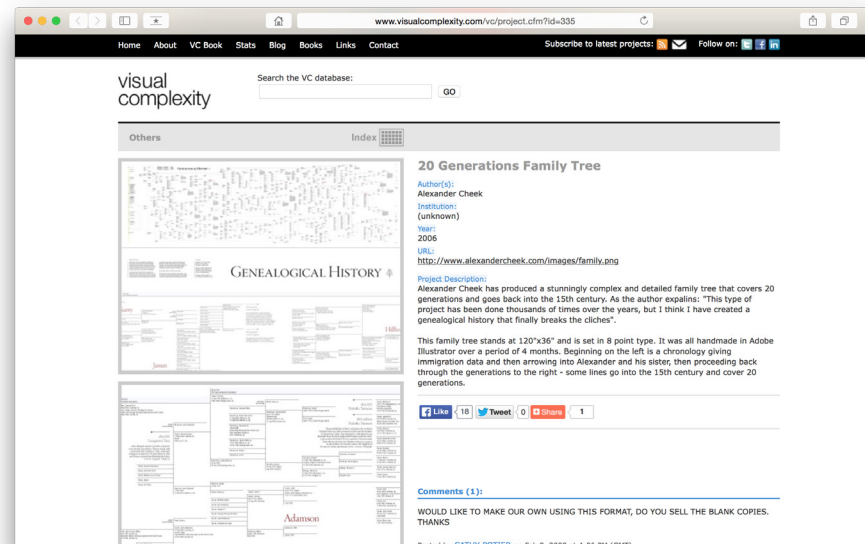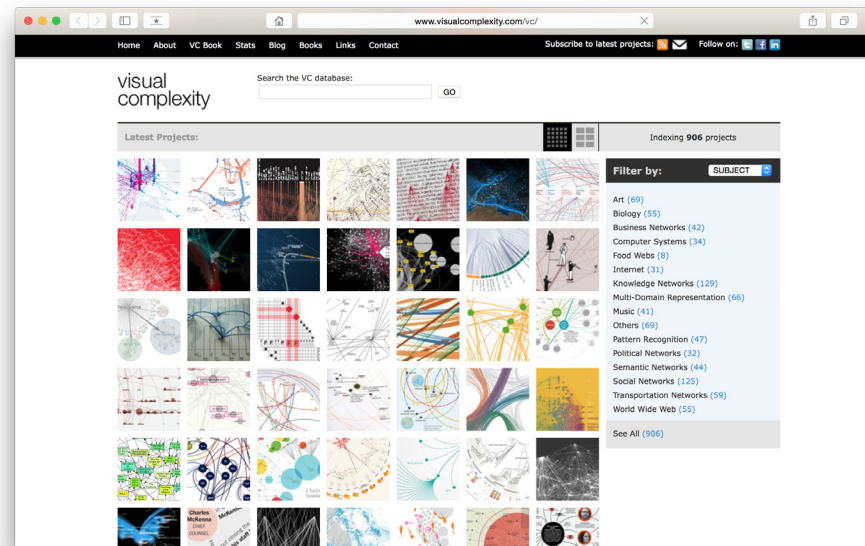
# Processing.org

## Ben Fry, Casey Reas

Processing.org, a flavor of Javascript developed for visual artists and designers who work through code, is an open-source platform. Though unrelated to the project I am proposing, their site showcases visual work uploaded by users and curated by the co-founders. It serves as another good example of content display and site structure.
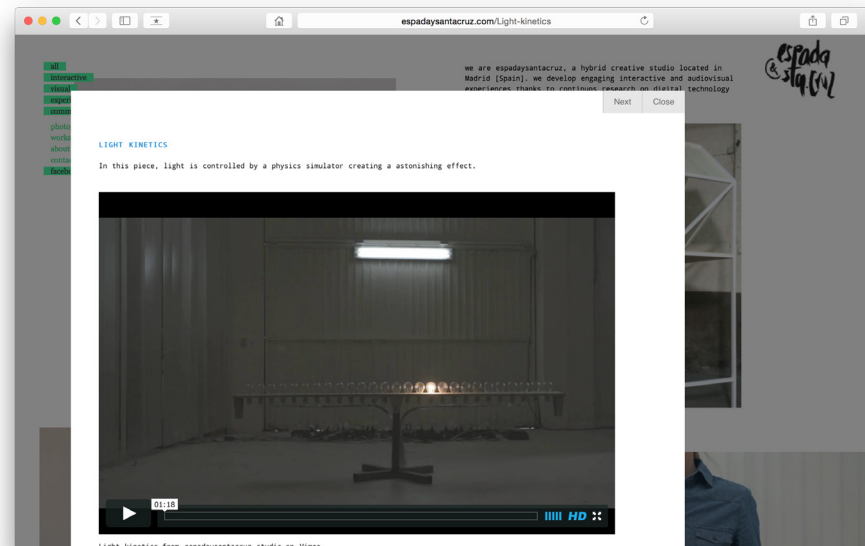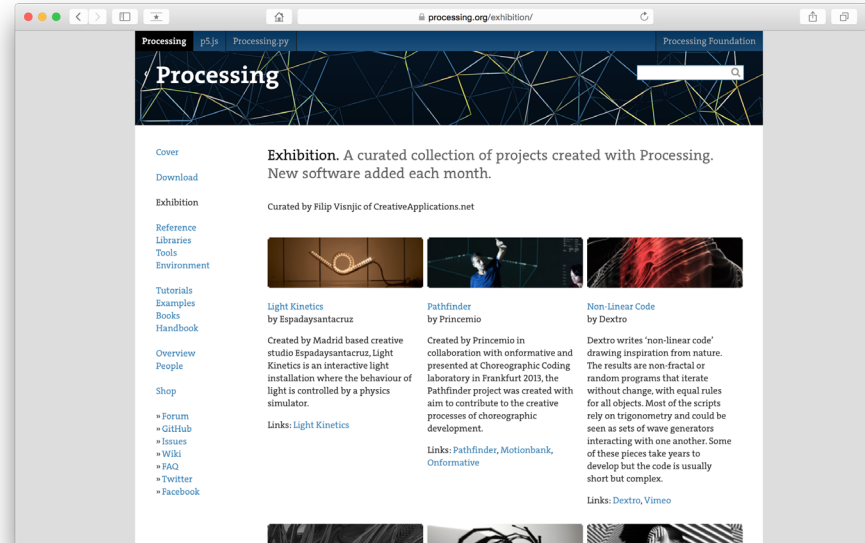
# AIGA Design Archives

## American Institute of Graphic Arts

AIGA manages one of the largest, if not the largest, repository of traditional graphic design work, mostly static in nature. The site sorts thumbnails based on user inputs across time, subject matter, or medium.
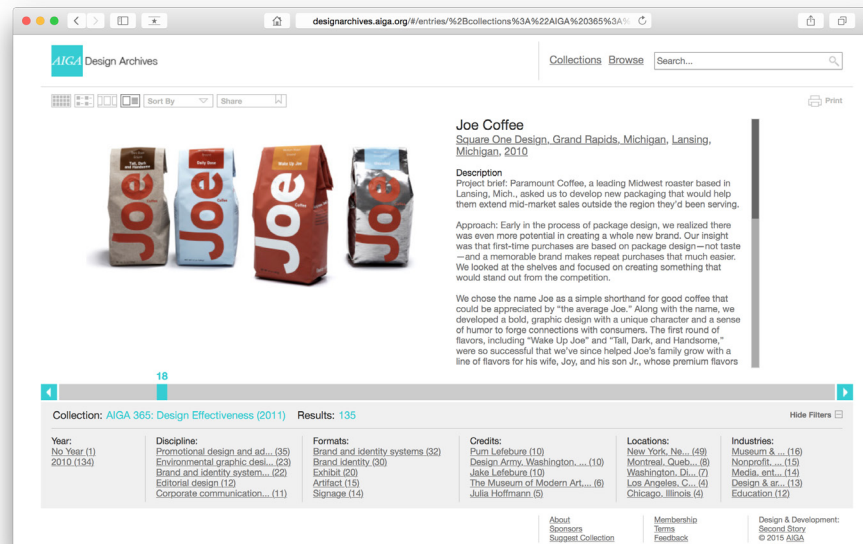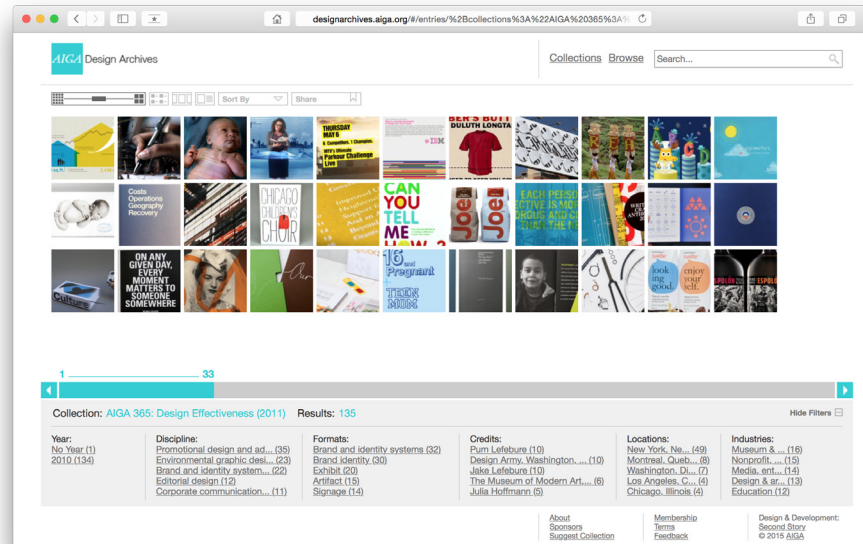
# Graphic Design Archives

## Rochester Institute of Technology

The RIT Graphic Design Archives is similar to the AIGA archives but more tightly curated and focused on their own collection. The site brings greater emphasis to the designers and their life, is simpler to navigate than AIGA, and contains especially unique work not seen on any other sites.
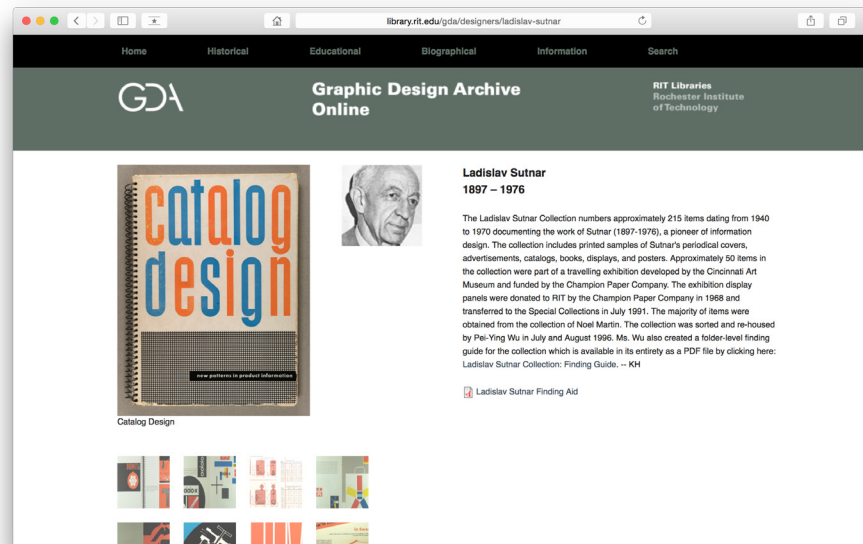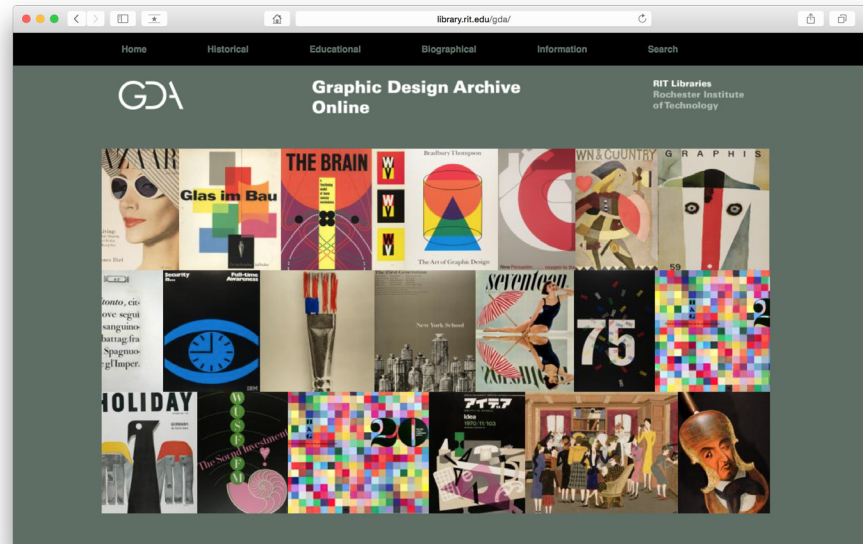
# Design Classics

## Phaidon Press

Phaidon Press created an iPad edition of its massive three-book series *Design Classics*. It uses unconventional ways of sorting and filtering, with often clunky but flashy techniques of image display. It was experimental for its time, arriving in the App Store not long after the iPad was released to market. It has not been updated since its release, nor is the content accessible in any other digital format.
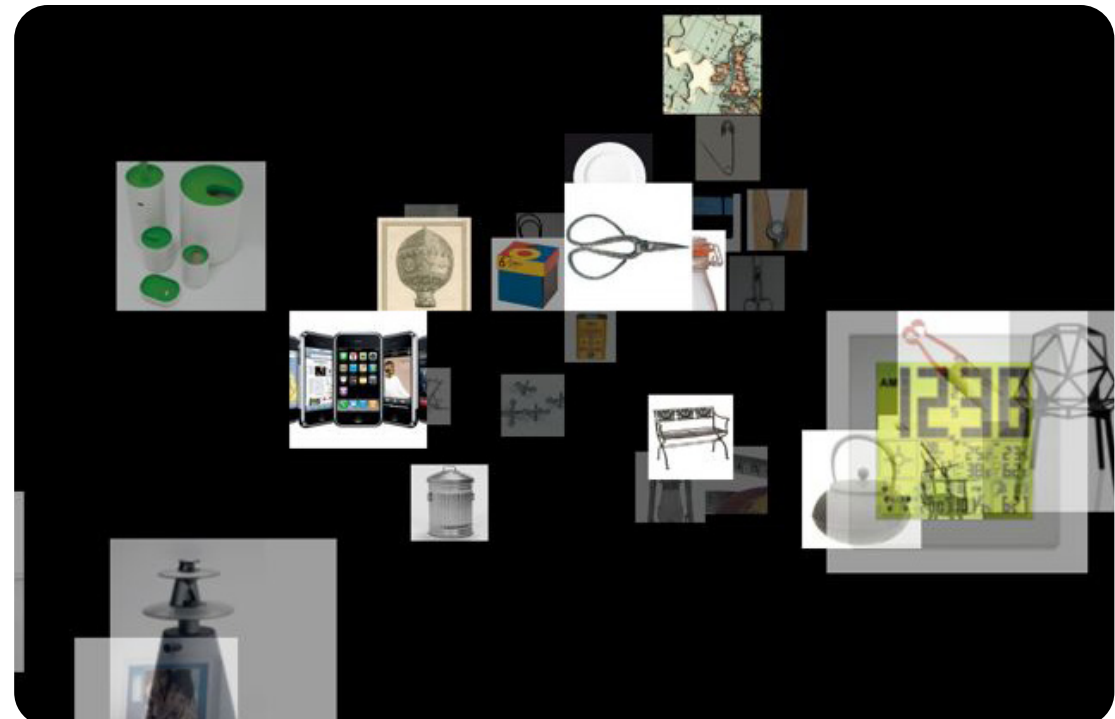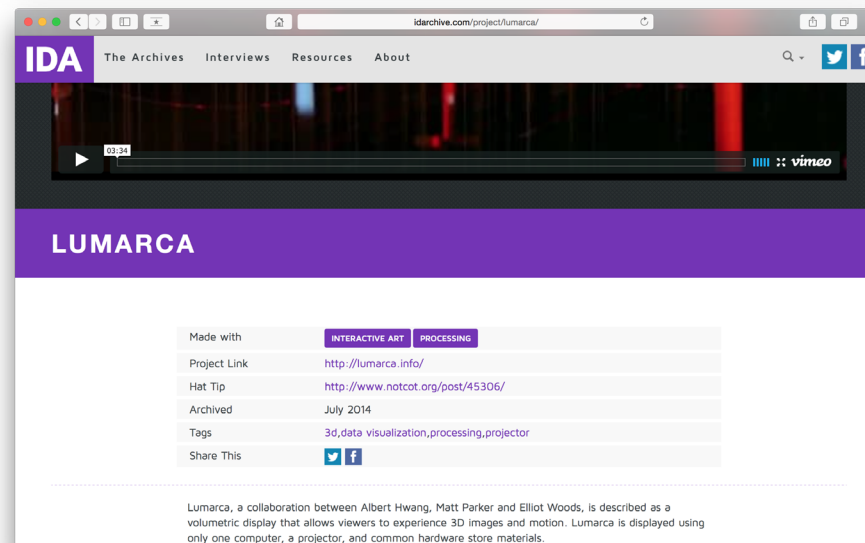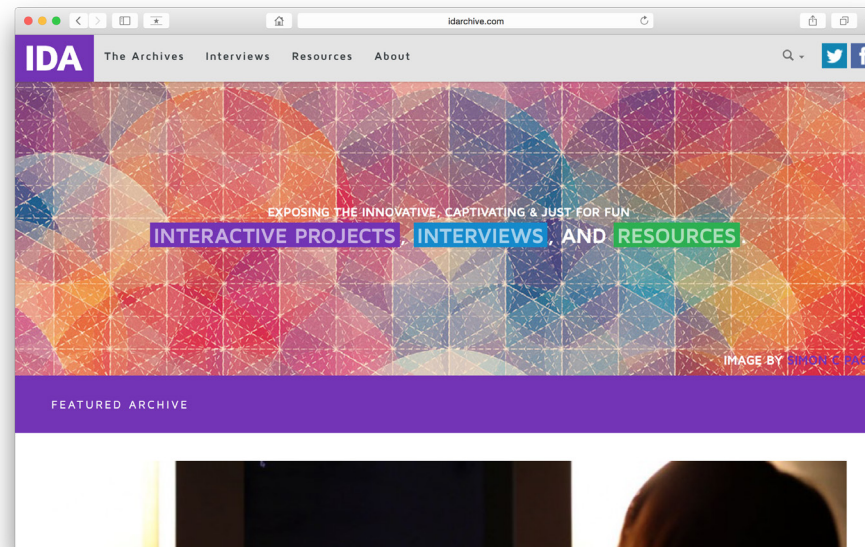
# Core77

## core77.com

Core77, one of the earliest web sites for industrial designers, stores exceptional design examples in a blog format with traditional search methods.
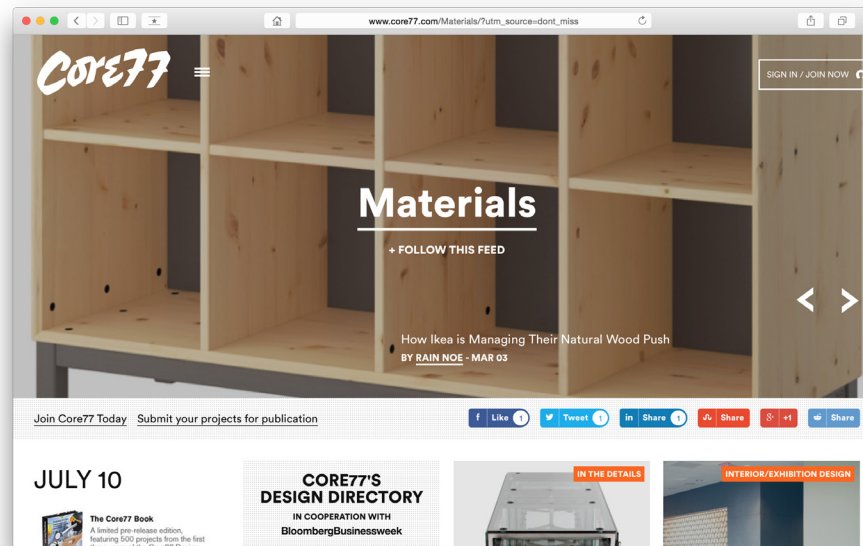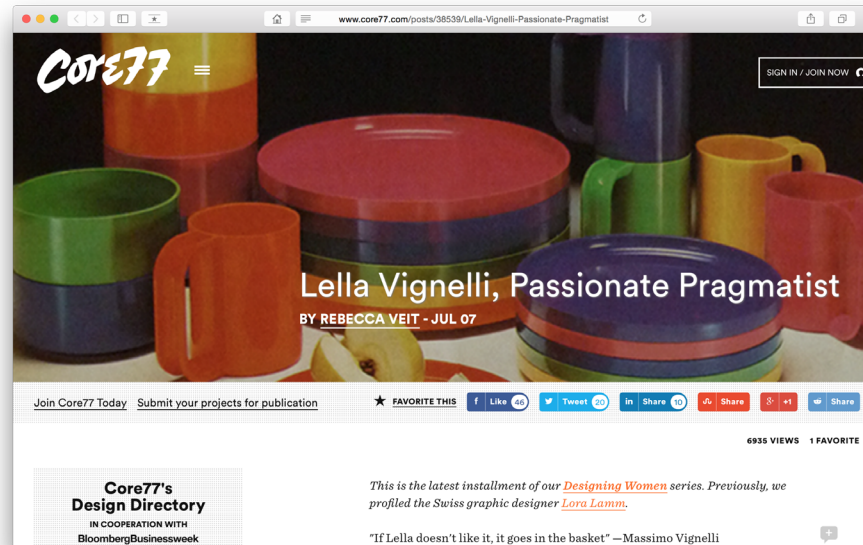
# Interactive Design Archive

idarchive.org

Interactive Design Archive archives digital and time-based media but often focuses on more artistic pieces that are presented in video format.
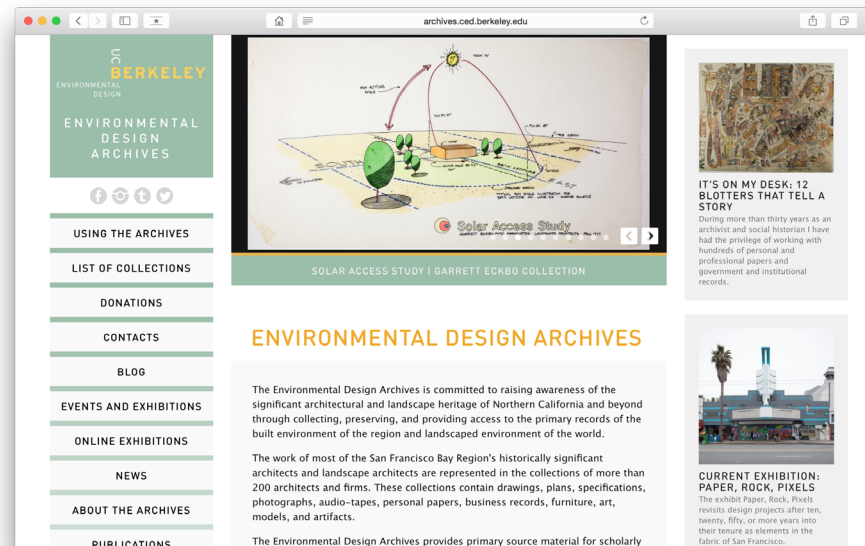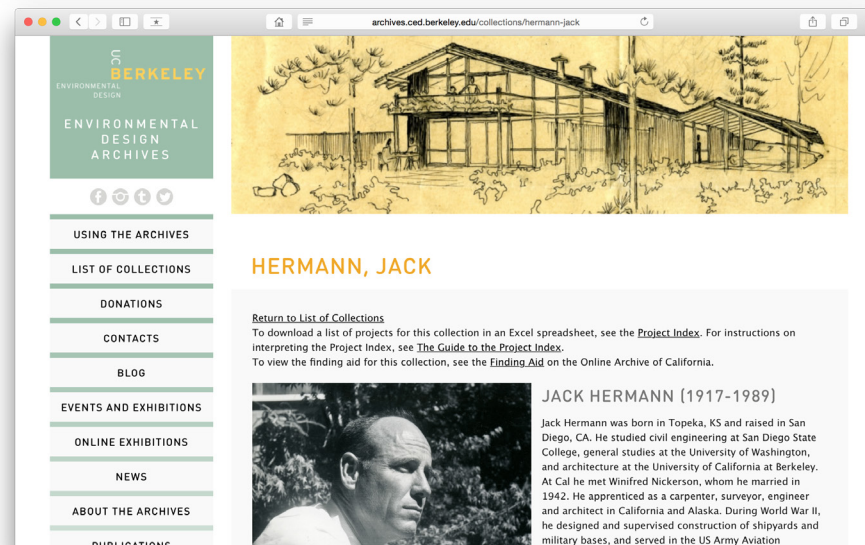
# Environmental Design Archives

## UC Berkeley College of Environmental Design

Like many library archives, CED at UC Berkeley presents its collection of architect, UD/UP, and landscape architecture works through a traditional text-and-image layout with some video. Like RIT's Design Archives, biographical information is showcased prominently.

# Infosthetics

## infostehetics.com

Infosthetics is a site similar to Visual Complexity but in a blog format. Its would sometimes profile news media examples but has not been updated since 2014.
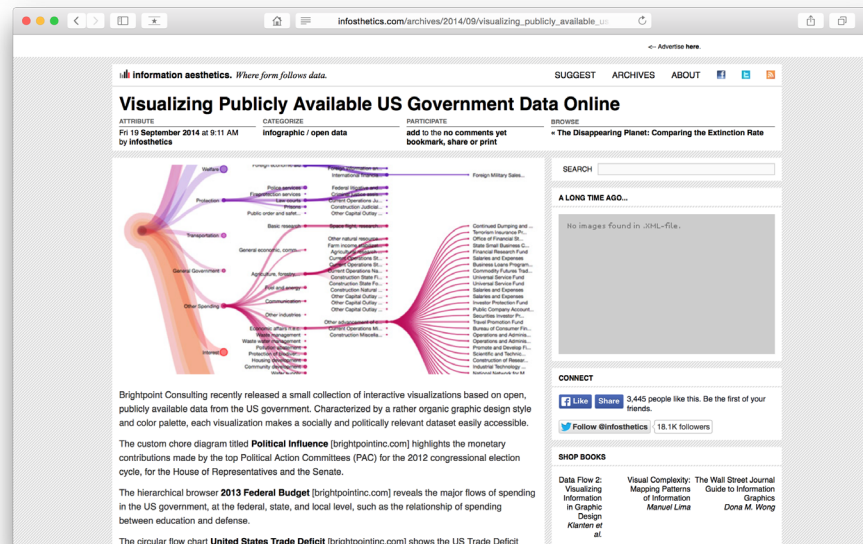
# Know More

## knowmore.washingtonpost.com

Know More is the FiveThirtyEight-inspired blog of the *Washington Post* which, within three weeks of its creation in 2014, became the publication's most popular blog. It highlights data-rich and visual journalism produced by the paper with simple links.
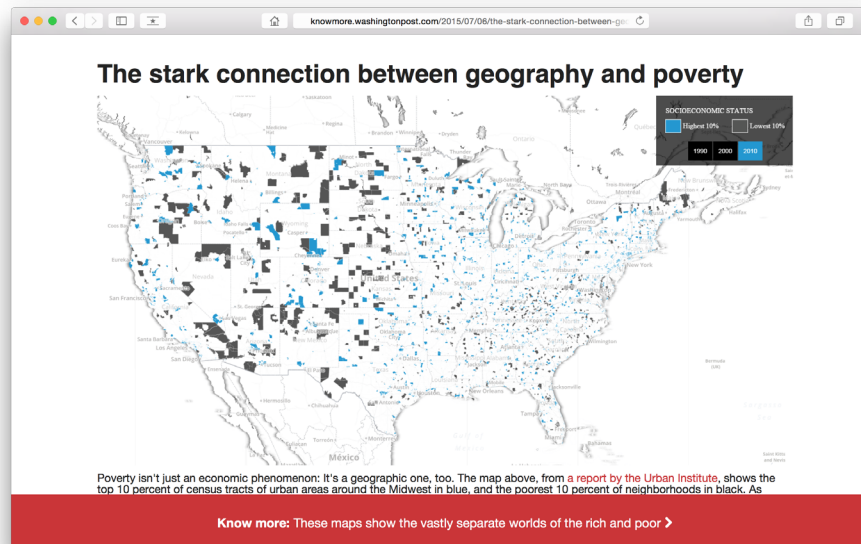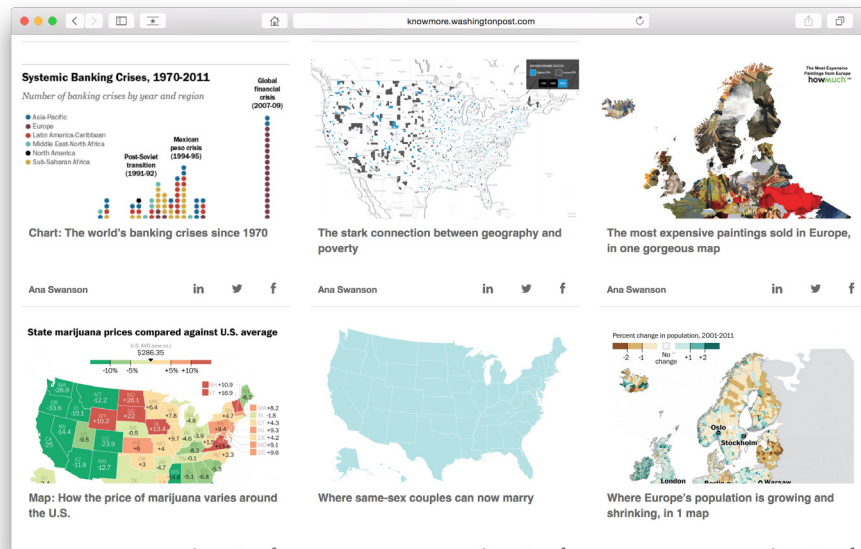
# New York Times Infographics

## smallmeans.com

This web site was a short-lived blog that linked-out to media sites from thumbnails. It did little-more than that and has not been updated since 2011.
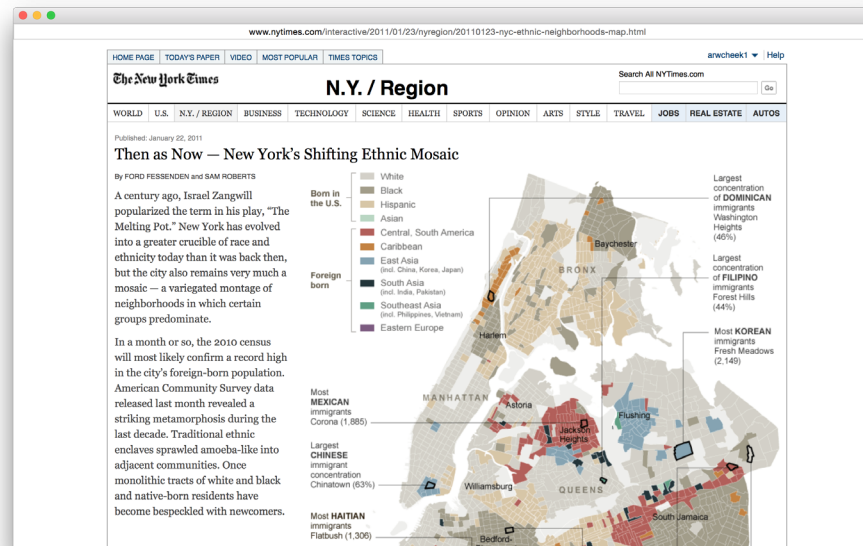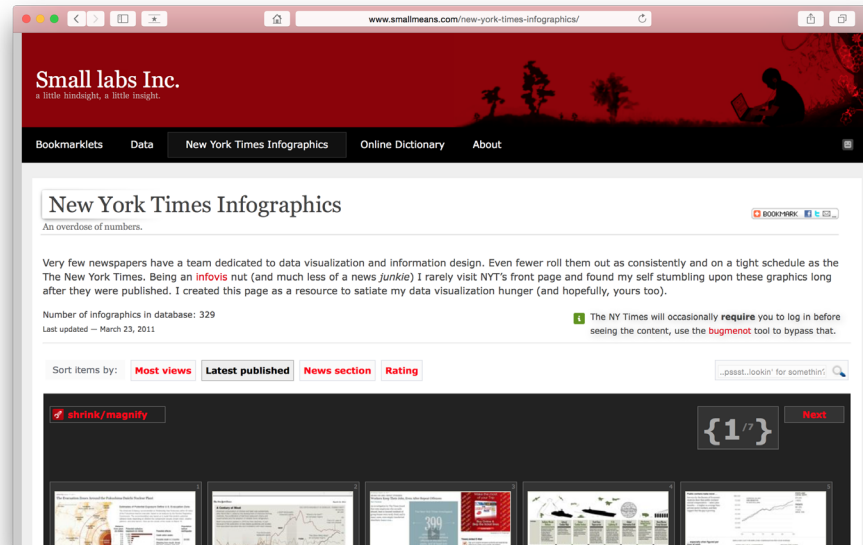
# Annuals

## New York Times, Washington Post, BBC

The sites that create these rich media examples have come to do annual portfolios of their work, but it's inconsistent and focused, obviously, on their work alone. Thumbnail images are strong but there is no space for discussion or criticism. Other sites that are creating exceptional work like Bloomberg have thus-far not created any annual reviews.
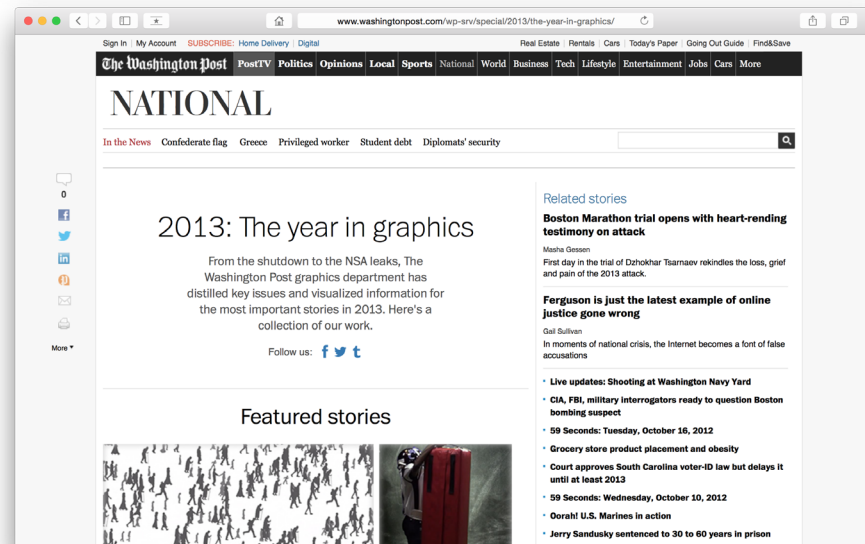
# Annuals

New York Times, Washington Post, BBC
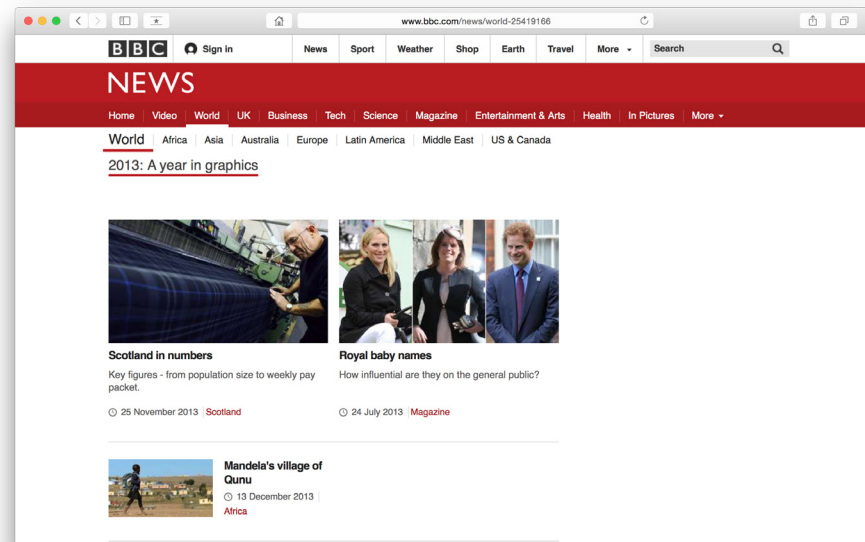
# Innovation Portfolio

## nytinnovation.com

The "innovation portfolio" is a flash-based archive created by the *Times* in 2011 aimed their audience of advertisers. It has not been updated, uses an outdated format, is buried and no longer used as part of their media kit. It is a showcase of all the ways not to design a web page or archive.

## Research Design and Methodology

Prototyping and wireframing: This project will employ traditional user interface design methods of development, namely, wireframing and prototyping the site with a process of on-going revision throughout the site's development.

Data collection: The site's content ("data") will be collected from *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, Bloomberg Business,* and others. The site will use screenshots of the interactive pieces with outbound links for the user to see the example in full. A cached version of the page will be kept in the event that the page is removed, but otherwise the site will primarily send users outbound. Site usage and user data will be collected with Google Analytics but not published or made public in any form. Use of user comments may be used for future publication with permission and a publisher agreement.

Use of existing data: The sites themselves could be considered "existing data." They will be used in the method described above.
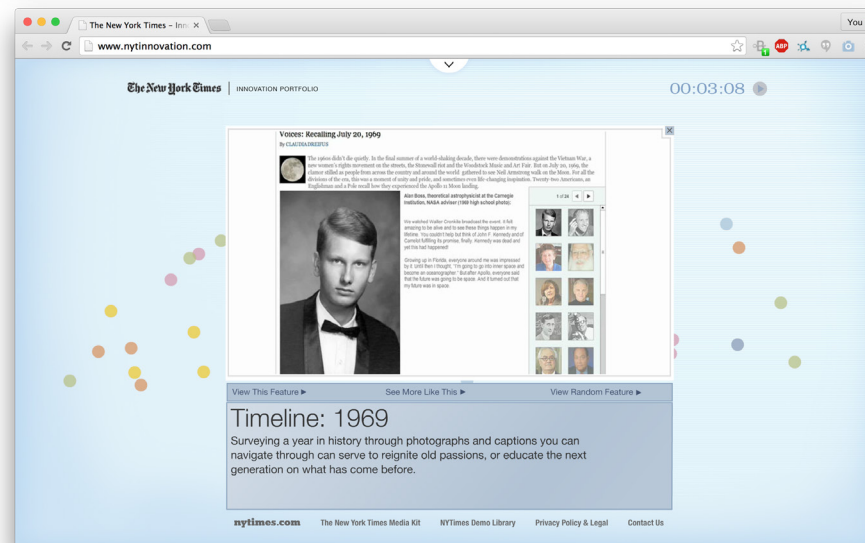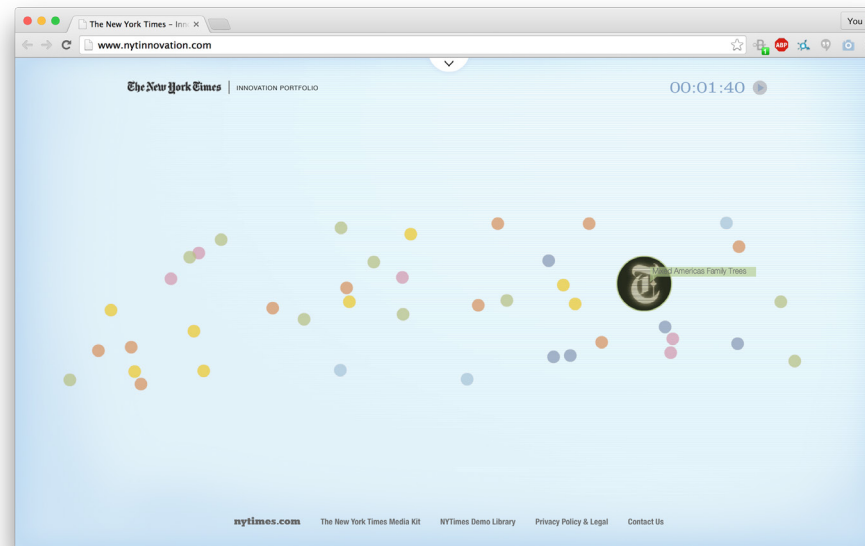
Compliance: This project does not involve research participants in its development. The use of example imagery in the form of screenshots and thumbnails is fair use.

## Literature

"New York Times Innovation Report." 97 Pages. New York: New York Times Co., 2014. Internal Document

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"Sorry, 'Snow Fall' Isn't Going to save the New York Times." *Pando*. May 13, 2013. Accessed July 18, 2015. https://pando.com/2013/05/13/sorry-snow-fall-isnt-going-to-save-the-new-york-times/.

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Terri Gross. WHYY, Philadelphia. 27 Oct. 2011.

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Tufte, Edward R. *Beautiful Evidence*. Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 2006.

# Proposed Site Design

This is the earliest mock-up of how the web site may look. A simple interface, giving as much real estate to the content itself, while allowing users to explore and sort through the content with ease. Comprehensive wireframes will be developed under funding support.

THE **I**NTERACTIVE NEWS

About          Suggestions          Contact          Search

Thumbnails | List

24 / 82   Sort by ▼

Tags   Sources   Popular   Search   More

Politics   Weather   Sports   Technology

Travel   Narrative   Biography   Disaster

Finance   United States   United Kingdom

Russia   Conflict   China   Education

Census   Middle East

Show All



The Black Budget, The Washington Post



NSA Files, The Guardian



Snow Fall, The New York Times



Word Train, The New York Times



BP Oil Spill, The New York Times



The Russia Left Behind, The New York Times

**Timeline**

**Months 1–3:**
Development of
content management system for
easy addition of new content.

**Months 4–6:**
Development of
front-end user interface.

**Months 7–9:**
Refinement of
entire system for usability,
functionality, and cleanliness.

**Months 10–12:**
Population of site with
screenshots, thumbnails,
tags, links, and more.

**12 months:**
Launch.

Developer needed for 9 month duration.

**Evaluation and Dissemination**

Traditionally, the success of a site such as this comes down to traffic, participation, and returned visits. In the commercial world, clicks equate to advertising dollars. The goals of The Interactive News are not commercial; the success of this site will come down to the quality of the content and visitor engagement as measured through returns, flow, and discussion. Discussion is a difficult thing to foster on the web (see: The 1% Rule) but what discussion does emerge here is more valuable than monthly traffic figures. Discussion "quality" is another matter. Design criticism sites like BrandNew and general message board communities like Reddit face trolling on a constant basis. Like nearly all other sites, The Interactive News would employ flagging techniques for commenting.

This project, being completely online, open, and without any paywalls or subscription requirements, will reach a wide audience for the grant money provided. I expect it to draw from a number of interest groups: interaction and digital designers, design and journalism educators, and media professionals.

The project may generate lectures and/or publications.

## Advisory Group

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"WE ARE ENTERING A GOLDEN AGE OF JOURNALISM. ...I LOOK AT MY BACKPACK HERE, AND IT CONTAINS MORE JOURNALISTIC FIREPOWER THAN THE ENTIRE NEWSROOM THAT I WALKED INTO 30 TO 40 YEARS AGO. IT'S CONNECTED TO THE CLOUD, I CAN MAKE DIGITAL RECORDINGS OF EVERYTHING THAT I DO, I CAN CHECK IN REAL TIME IF SOMEONE IS TELLING ME THE TRUTH, I HAVE A STILL CAMERA THAT TAKES VIDEO THAT I CAN UPLOAD QUICKLY AND SEAMLESSLY." DAVID CARR ON *FRESH AIR* 10.27.2011