Visual Storytelling at the Graphics Department of The New York Times

SERGIO PECANHA

ABSTRACT This article discusses the process of creating information graphics and multimedia presentations at *The New York Times*. It introduces the structure of *The New York Times*' graphics team and discusses a few projects to illustrate this group at work.

An important distinction at *The New York Times* is that the graphics department is involved in and generates all the steps for the creation of infographics. A group of about 30 people produce everything: including reporting and writing copy, processing datasets, web development, drawing schematics, designing print pieces, and developing and creating the interface of multimedia projects.

The author is a graphics editor working primarily with the International news section. This paper explores examples of graphics reporting as well as the design and editing that were part of the coverage of the wave of unrest in the Middle East, commonly referred to as the Arab Spring.

The story of a street destroyed by the war in Libya is used as an example of reporting and design. Two projects related to the ongoing violence and refugee crisis in Syria are examples included to reveal the creative process for both print and the process involved in web presentations.

THE PROCESS OF VISUAL STORYTELLING

The New York Times Graphics Department is a team of about 30 people that create original information design for the newsroom's print and digital platforms. The group is responsible for all aspects of the production of these graphics: from selecting subjects to researching, data analysis, and reporting; from designing print layouts and web interfaces to drawing, programming, animating, and writing headlines and copy. The only part of the process that is done outside is the final copy-editing, which is the responsibility of another department.

To a great part, the team's success is the result of the collaboration within this very diverse group of talents.

Academically, they hail from wide range of backgrounds: economics, statistics, cartography, computer science, architecture, journalism, and design represent some examples. The team also has a significant representation of minorities and foreign-born populations: Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Korean, and Finnish are some of the native languages spoken. Some began at *The New York Times* as writers and have more than thirty years of experience. Some left college a few years ago and started as developers. About 25 percent of the group are women. Staff members have traveled to cover breaking news in the U.S., several of the past winter and summer Olympics, and even international conflicts.

All of the staff are considered journalists and work under the group's umbrella job title: "graphics editor." Some in the group are assigned to produce and coordinate graphics created for specific news sections: Sports, Culture, Metropolitan, International, National and Science, for example. The remaining staff shifts between assignments for all desks, as required.

In late 2010, I was assigned to work on graphics for the International section. A few weeks later, a man set himself on fire in Tunisia, thus initiating the Arab Spring. In the following sections, I will describe a few projects from this period and examples of how the Graphics team worked to generate material germane to this critical and highly-charged international occurrence.

THE DEVASTATION OF A CITY IN LIBYA — AN EXAMPLE OF REPORTING

For nearly three months Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi's forces imposed a brutal siege on the city of Misurata, in Libya. Tripoli Street, the city's main commercial road, was left in rubbles.

Reporting is an essential part of the creation of information graphics at *The New York Times*. I had been covering the conflict in Libya for nearly three months—from New York— when the graphic (FIGURE 1) was published. I had developed a network of sources inside Libya and out.I followed the news coverage daily and compared whatthe sources said with what was being reported by news agencies—and by our reporters in the country. I also compared files they sent me with videos and wire photos, and I was able to slowly weed out the sources.

I connected with people in Libya through three different sources: 1. An amateur cartographer who was doing some interesting maps with information she collected from twitter; 2. a reader of Libyan origin who emailed us complaining about our coverage, to whom I replied; 3. a Libyan activist who maintained an anti-Qaddafi website.

FIGURE 1: *Final graphic.*

Although my main sources were on the rebel side, my graphic focused on visible evidence of destruction, and not on who did it, nor how it happened. In addition, the Libyan government had shown by that time that it was not always a reliable source of accurate information. The Libyan government restricted or denied journalists' access to the city, and denying as well, for example, that it was using cluster bombs to attack civilian areas.

On the chart, (FIGURE 2) the letter 'R' stands for revolutionaries in Libya. The lines are recommendations or connections. I crossed the information from the people marked in red to create the graphic.

COLLECTING AND VERIFYING THE INFORMATION
I reached Faraj Akwedeir, a photographer documenting the fighting for the rebels, via Twitter connections. I spoke with him on Skype and he shared the sequence of photos used in the graphic with me. Since I reached Faraj via Skype,
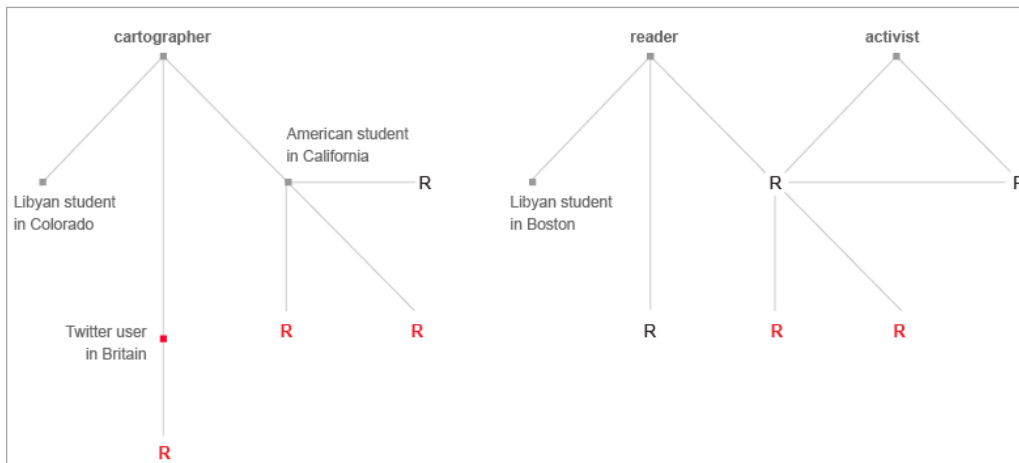
FIGURE 2: *Diagram*

how could I be sure that he was actually in Misurata? The photo below (FIGURE 3), among the first that Faraj shared with me, was essential to affirm this information.

I recognized the blue plane from wire photographs of Misurata's airport that had come in a day before, when rebel fighters took the airport. That was the first indication that Faraj had actually been at the scene. Additionally, he also sent me links to YouTube videos. (FIGURE 4) In one of them, I recognized a man with whom I had spoken via Skype a few days before, whom I knew was in Misurata. That was the second sign that Faraj's information was reliable.

I had wanted to make a graphic showing the destruction along Tripoli Street for weeks, but the heavy fighting on the ground did not allow this while our photographer was in the city. I connected with Faraj a week after the fighting in Tripoli Street had ended. It was then comparatively safe for him to drive by and photograph a series of façades along the street.

CREDIT: FARAJ AKWEDEIR

FIGURE 3: *Blue plane*

CREDIT: YOUTUBE

FIGURE 4: *Frame of YouTube video.*

Since the photos came from someone working with the rebels, I needed to be very careful about their authenticity. The raw photos were sent to me and I put the collage together. In addition, four people on our staff checked the photos and found no sign of doctoring.

Most importantly, C.J. Chivers, who was reporting from the city for *The New York Times*, helped to confirm that the photos were reliable. He had been at that same area a few days before, and witnessed the destruction. This was the final verification that I needed.

My goal was to give readers a glimpse of life in this location before the war. To rebuild that connection, I reached two former and two current residents, who helped me label the collage. It took me two days to be certain. I only labeled places where I could get confirmation from at least three sources.

Photos of a street in rubbles are a powerful visual. But when all you see are destroyed buildings, it is easy to forget that this is a place where real people live. With the labels, I wanted to ensure that readers would realize this.
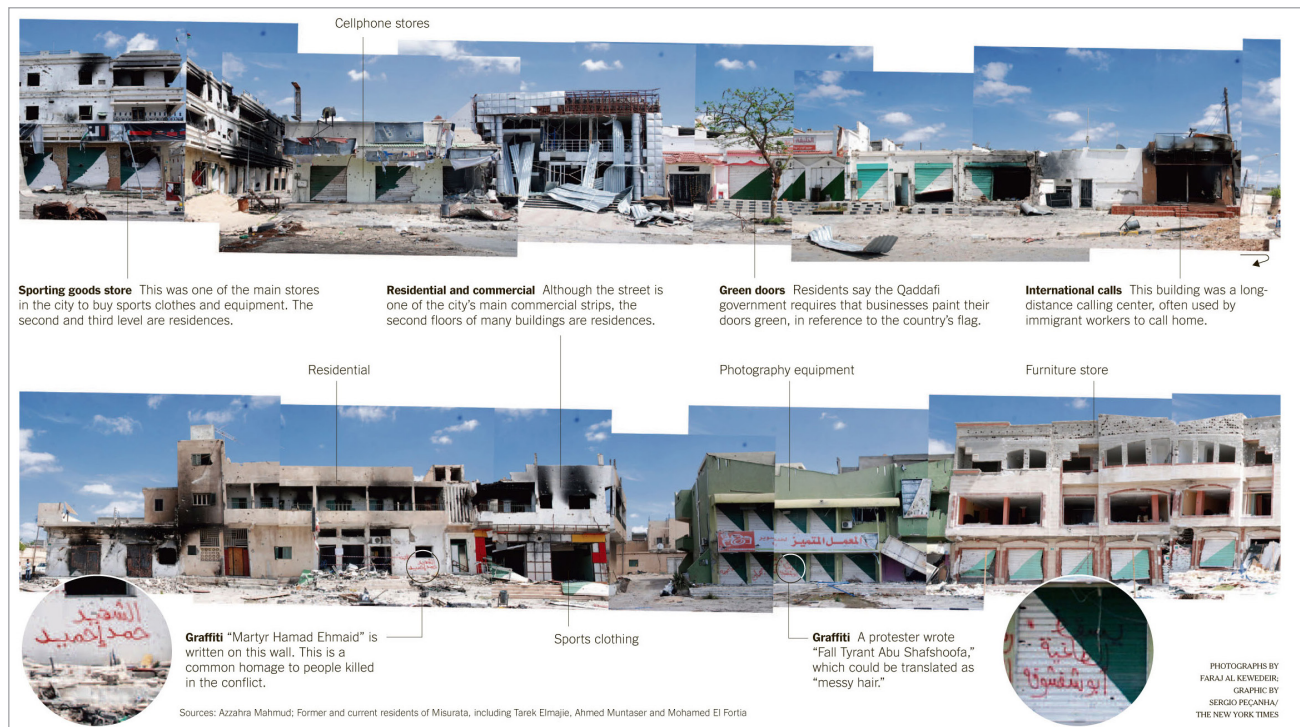
PJIM

Cellphone stores

Sporting goods store This was one of the main stores in the city to buy sports clothes and equipment. The second and third level are residences.

Residential and commercial Although the street is one of the city's main commercial strips, the second floors of many buildings are residences.

Green doors Residents say the Qaddafi government requires that businesses paint their doors green, in reference to the country's flag.

International calls This building was a long-distance calling center, often used by immigrant workers to call home.

Residential

Photography equipment

Furniture store

Graffiti "Martyr Hamad Ehmaid" is written on this wall. This is a common homage to people killed in the conflict.

Sports clothing

Graffiti A protester wrote "Fall Tyrant Abu Shafshoofa," which could be translated as "messy hair."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
FARAJ AL KEWEDEIR;
GRAPHIC BY
SERGIO PEÇANHA/
THE NEW YORK TIMES

Sources: Azzahra Mahmud; Former and current residents of Misurata, including Tarek Elmajie, Ahmed Muntaser and Mohamed El Fortia

FIGURE 5: *Detail of finished graphic showing labels*

THE MESSAGE DICTATES FORM

Digital media is a major part of the work of the graphics team at *The New York Times*. As with print graphics, we allow the message to determine the storytelling format.

In International news it is often impossible to collect information for data visualizations, so many web projects are multimedia presentations. Generally there is one traditional graphic component to everything we do: a map, an annotated image, or a table, for example. But the general focus of our work is to tell stories visually— stories that could not be told just with mere words, or photos, or videos.

THE ZAATARI REFUGEE CAMP

By May 2013, the Syrian war had caused more than 1.3 million people to flee the country. In Jordan, the Zaatari refugee camp emerged as a city of tents and trailers in the desert. In eight months, it grew from 2,400 to more than 25,000 shelters, housing upwards of 120,000 people.

Our correspondent had traveled to the Zaatari refugee camp with a photographer and a videographer, and I had accessed a United Nations analysis of satellite images showing the camp's evolution. In the newsroom, I have access to the material collected by the people in the field. It quickly became obvious that the pieces would work better in a cohesive multimedia package (as opposed to, say, separate links on the website).

After a couple of meetings with the story editor and with video and photography editors, we created a mockup with real descriptive copy to help all parts involved to visualize what was intended to be the final piece (FIGURE 6). It was essential to use real copy, not the dummy copy "Lorem Ipsum." It was critical to give a sense of what the visual story was to be about, so I roughly wrote this copy. This was later replaced by copy from the assigned writer.

I would not specifically call the Zaatari piece an example of information graphics. But it certainly is visual journalism that could only be done by our department. Ultimately, this is our focus.

WATCHING SYRIA'S WAR

Ignoring formal definitions of what is a graphic, what is multimedia, and what is data visualization is actually an important characteristic for our approach to information design. It allows the message to determine the format of the piece—it helps us to stretch the limits of what we do.

Watching Syria's War, a multimedia feature based on videos posted online by citizen journalists, is another example of our freestyle approach. The initial idea was
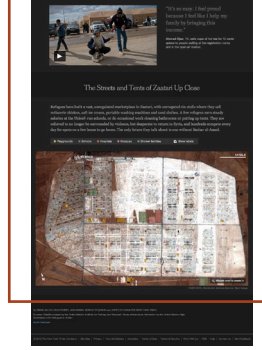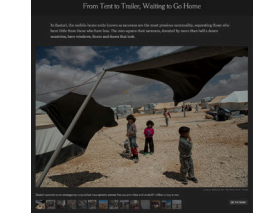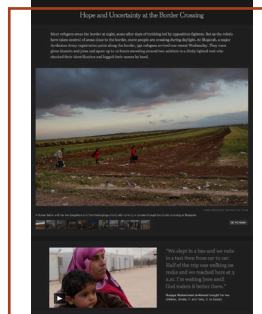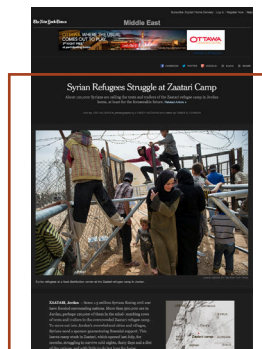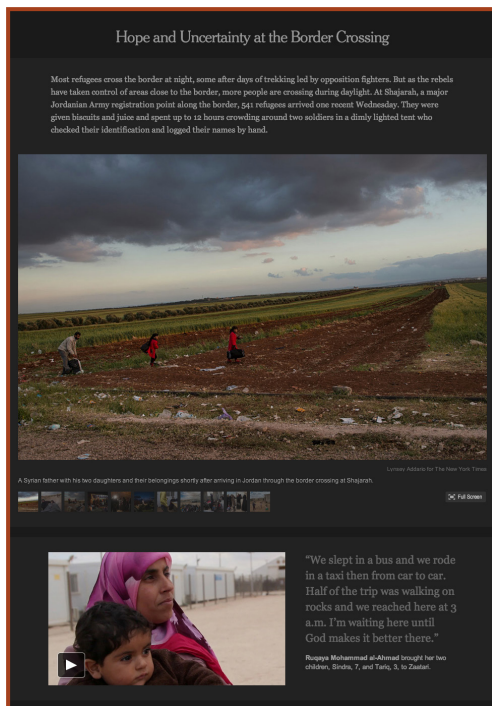
CREDIT: THE NEW YORK TIMES
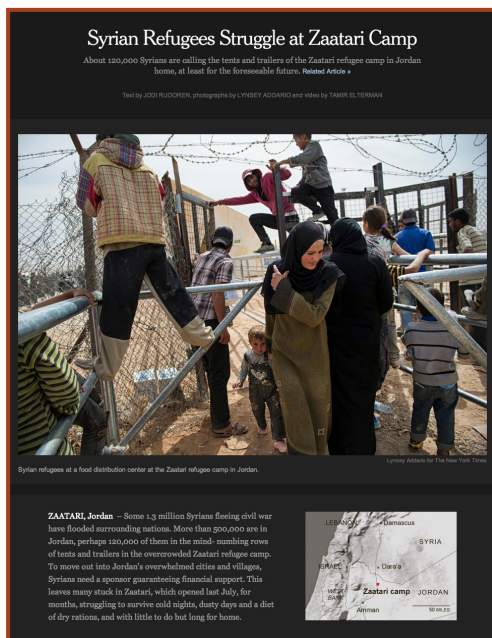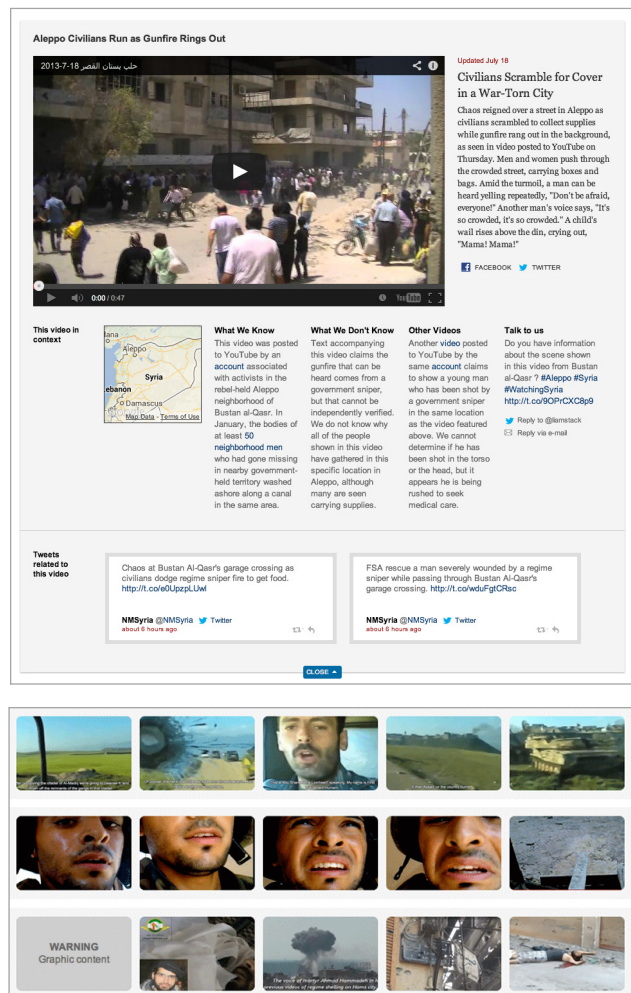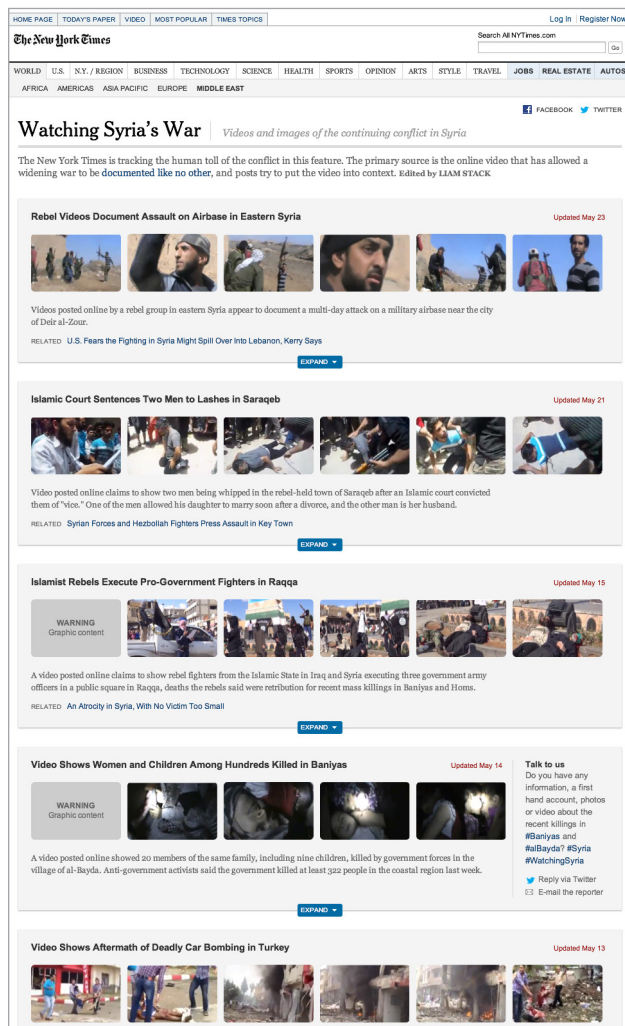
FIGURE 6: *Zaatari set.*

FIGURE 7: *Watching Syria*

to make a data-driven update of the war in Syria. Yet we had limitations of the data available, and this proved that our initial plan was not feasible. Opportunistically, we noticed an abundance of citizen-shot video. So we switched gears: Watching Syria's War became a video feature.

The videos are collected via social media by Liam Stack, a reporter from *The New York Times* assigned to the project. He puts the videos in context, with a description and sections called "What we know" and "What we don't know." The feature was conceived to emphasize videos about people, as opposed to scenes of bombings from a distance.

Watching Syria's War has told hundreds of stories that might, otherwise, never be known. It was first imagined to be "a graphic," our generic term for the work of the Graphics team, but became something different along the way. Like most of our projects, it is the result of the collaboration of a multidisciplinary team, focused on finding a unique design approach for each storytelling problem.

BIOGRAPHY

Sergio Peçanha is an information designer. He has been Graphics Editor at T*he New York Times* since 2008. Prior to T*he New York Times*, he was Graphics Director of *The Dallas Morning News*, Texas and Designer at *Globo.com* in his hometown of Rio de Janeiro. His work has been recognized by the *Malofiej, Society for News Design and Communication Arts*. He majored in Journalism at *Rio's Federal University* and graduated in 1998.