

Kat Downs, graphics director, The Washington Post

Megan Cloherty, producer, It's All Journalism

Thanks for listening to It's All Journalism. I'm Megan Cloherty joined by Mike O'Connell and Anna Miars, who's our new co-producer. And today we're joined by Kat Downs, interactive designer and graphics director at *The Washington Post*. A UNC [University of North Carolina] graduate, Kat studied multimedia and photojournalism in school. And then after interning at *USA Today* and the *Baltimore Sun*, she joined the *Post*.

Kat is also part of the National Security Reporting Project at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism. Thanks for joining us.

Kat Downs, graphics director, The Washington Post

Thanks for having me.

Megan Cloherty

So tell us, you said you've been at The Post for five years.

Kat Downs

Yes.

Megan Cloherty

And you've been moving up the chain. How has the last week been? I mean, describe the last week for us.

Michael O'Connell

This is the week following the Boston stuff.

Kat Downs

It's been crazy. The bombings happened on Monday. I formally moved into my new role as graphics director on Tuesday.

Megan Cloherty

That's nice.

Kat Downs

Just in time to kind of lead sort of the graphics team over the next few days, the chases, finding the suspects and all the kind of stuff. So, it's been a crazy couple weeks.

Megan Cloherty

And as everything comes in, obviously, you have to kind of process, I mean, obviously, Monday you want to put together Monday. But in a situation like that, it keeps changing, right?

Kat Downs

Right.

Megan Cloherty

Was Monday, did you just encapsulate Monday and move on and do something different for Friday? I mean, you guys had that timeline.

Kat Downs

Yeah.

Megan Cloherty

Describe your workflow for us.

Kat Downs

What we want to try to do is to build pieces that can kind of live and continue to be built upon as new details are released. So, Monday, we got up online maps really quickly, just showing the location of bombing one and bombing two. And then, you know, we did that for print after we finished our Web projects.

On Tuesday, we were just thinking about how to advance the story past what it had been on Monday and build some elements that we would be able to use as more details came out. So, we started building a street model that we ended up using a lot over the coming days. And we started adding more information. I guess that was the day we had details come out about the pressure cooker bomb lid that was found, stuff like that. So we started thinking about how we could explain the devices that were used, where they were, how they were put out, stuff like that.

And then, as Wednesday came, we had video of where the suspects were. Then we did Thursday. Then we did Friday, which was crazy. We had all these new details and all this information and so we added a big timeline component.

How we kind of managed our pages was that we would publish something and then try to build on top so that, I think what happens a lot of times in news stories is that sometimes is that it can be really hard to follow quick developments, because you don't have context of what's happened in the past.

Megan Cloherty

Right.

Kat Downs

And so, what we try to do with this piece is add new context every time there was an update. We weren't getting rid of the old stuff. We were still saying, "At one point, they thought a camera at Lord & Taylor was relevant, but later it was decided that it wasn't."

So, the page ended up being sort of a stack of graphics that we had done each day that revealed new information about the story.

And then on Saturday, once the older brother was dead and the younger brother was in custody, we created another page that kind of looked back at it in a chronological way. So, we had two pieces, one that was sort of our breaking news vehicle and one that was more of a storytelling piece that you could go back and add in some content.

Megan Cloherty

Are you guys separate from all the reporting that's going on? Are you working with the reporters to put those maps and everything in their articles? How does that work? How do you guys overlap?

Kat Downs

We're pretty close. We had basically like a listserv for Boston news, which included everybody that was working on Boston coverage. That was really, really useful and the first time that I'd been on a listserv like that. I'm sure it's not the first time they've existed. So we had reporters on the ground. Every time they would hear something, they would send it out on that list. And we were in really close contact with them so that we're like, "We want to put this on this map" or "We want to locate this." And then they would find the place or confirm that that detail was correct and that we were ready to report it. Cause, as you guys know, there was a lot of misinformation out there during that week.

Megan Cloherty

Yeah.

Kat Downs

So it was really challenging to figure out what was true and what we were comfortable with on an organizational level reporting, not just saying that it had been reported by others, but something that we could confirm and kind of call our own. So, the relationship between the reporters and, we have graphics reporters on our team also do that, a couple of people.

Anna Miars

Graphics reporters?

Kat Downs

Yeah.

Megan Cloherty

That's cool.

Kat Downs

Yeah, it's very cool. We're very lucky to have people who do that. Basically, that's a job, it's different than traditional reporting, because you're really thinking about visual display, explanatory, a lot more data analysis and stuff like that. So, those people are really instrumental in finding the details that you don't sometimes need in a written story, but you need in order to put things on a map or into a diagram.

Anna Miars, producer, It's All Journalism

Are those people typically on the ground? Or are they getting information from other people that are at the scene?

Kat Downs

Depends on the situation. If this were to have happened in D.C., we probably would've sent our graphics people out there to survey the scene. But because it was in Boston, we only sent so many people there and so it's better to share resources. In that case, we didn't have people on the ground.

Megan Cloherty

How big of a role does social play as far as graphics go? Cause obviously reporters, individually, you want to brand yourself on social media, especially if you're a reporter and the Post obviously has a huge presence online. But as far as the graphics department, tell me about that and how you share what you're doing?

Kat Downs

So we have a Twitter account for Post Graphics, it's [@PostGraphics](#) and then all of us have individual accounts. And basically we just try to tweet every time we do something, especially if it's breaking news, we try to get it out as fast as we have the project up. What'll happen a lot of times is that our [Washington Post](#) account will retweet [@PostGraphics](#) or one of us. And then, we also have a [Facebook](#) account where we post everything, a page. And then we have a [Tumblr](#), where we do behind the scenes, which is a little bit more our process of how we get things done and less, "Here it is."

Megan Cloherty

Like pulling back the curtain kind of?

Kat Downs

Yeah, so we do a lot of, you know, why we use this kind of display and how we gather this data. And how we think about things.

Megan Cloherty

What's the following on that? Cause not a lot of people use Tumblr newswise.

Anna Miars

[The White House](#) just went on Tumblr.

Kat Downs

It's pretty good. I mean, when we first launched it we had, I think like 600 referrals from Tumblr in the first week or something, which isn't insanely good, but it's not bad for something that we haven't put a ton of resources into.

Megan Cloherty

Right.

Kat Downs

And that stuff is pretty, that behind the scenes stuff is pretty targeted. And so, the hope is to connect really with that community through that device in a more targeted way than we really do with our Facebook and our Twitter, which is more of a blast.

Michael O'Connell

Is there any of those that you particularly prefer working on?

Kat Downs

Any of those mediums?

Michael O'Connell

Yeah. That show off your work better. I stumped you.

Kat Downs

I like them all for different reasons. I mean, I think the Tumblr is nice because it gives us a chance to write-through some of our thinking, which I think is more interesting. It's offering something different than just a link or whatever. Now that we can get images in our Twitter feed, I like that a lot better, because you can actually put the graphic in the feed and people can see it. Plus, people on Twitter love charts. I mean, if you put the word "chart" in a tweet, it's ...

Megan Cloherty

Really? I don't work a lot in charts.

Michael O'Connell

I can just put "chart" on my tweets.

Kat Downs

Every time. I try not to do that every time. That's one of the really exciting things about working in information graphics right now is that it's a thing. It's really popular. There's a lot of people who are trying to do it. There's a million new tools to use. And so, when you put things out there, people are excited about them and they're interested in seeing them and that interest is expanding beyond people who have traditionally been interested in that kind of stuff, other graphics artists and people. So it makes it really exciting.

Michael O'Connell

What makes it nice, people on Twitter, they like Instagram and images and stuff. But the fact is, with a chart, you're getting a concentrated piece of information. So, whereas everybody else is struggling to send a link to a story or you're trying in a 140 characters to get what the facts are, here you've got — boom — you know, here's a representation of something that you can provide all this information that you can break down. It's clear why that's so effective in that medium.

Megan Cloherty

Where do you turn to for inspiration as far as coming up with ideas? I know when there's breaking news, you obviously, there's a formula and you've gotta get it out. Maps are maps. But I mean, when you are looking for more creative projects or working on a long-term project, what are some of the sources you go to? I'm stumping you again.

Kat Downs

There are so many. Obviously, there are the things that you look at in the news industry, all the big ones, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *LA Times*, *NPR*. There's so many great things being done in news, but there are so many things being done outside of news, and that's kind of, I guess if you want to lead the industry, then you kind of look at other things. There's a lot of non-profit news, kind of smaller things or companies that create interactive graphics for different organizations, government, advertising. And they're exploring storytelling in a completely different way, a non-traditional way, then we come at it from a news organization perspective. I think that they're a lot more risky with their design and user interface.

I think there's a lot for us to learn and think about when we kind of look outside specifically around thinking about how people consume graphics on phones and all that stuff, which is a huge, huge thing for us this year. We're now creating what we call adaptive designs for 75 percent of our pieces, which is huge. If you'd asked me in November, we'd never created a mobile-specific design.

If you're looking outside, you see a lot of things, but there's no internal pressure to do within the news industry. But you know that you should be doing it and that's why I think it's kind of important to look around more. If you spend too much time navel gazing, you kind of just reverb.

Megan Cloherty

Right, yeah. You're putting out the same stuff. It's like that with anything, I think. If you write enough breaking news stories, you start writing kind of the same —

Michael O'Connell

The same formula,

Megan Cloherty

The same formula, yeah.

Michael O'Connell

So, recognizing that mobile is going to be such a huge thing as we move forward, what is the thinking on that? I've got a graphic that I've created for the website, what am I going to have to do to adapt that? How do we change that?

Kat Downs

We're trying a lot of things. I mean, everybody talks about mobile first design. I would say we're not there. We're trying. It's challenging because you want to start with the story and then figure out what people are looking for. In a small screen, they're reading it in the bus or in their bed or whatever. And then at their desktop, where they have a little bit more time to sit back and really explore something.

So generally what we're doing now is we're thing about, "OK, what is the most important information people need from this piece and how can we create something really robust for people who have time to consume it? And then, something kind of slimmed back for phones.

We've done, basically, more targeted filtering, so based on your location or some kind of basically filtering or selection and we're mostly doing charting, mapping, smaller versions of what we're doing on the Web. And right now, it kind of requires more of an extra step than we'd like to have it. So I think our goal over the coming year is to make it so that it really is a single-step process to create something that works on both. It's just harder because it's not just the design of the page, it's the content of the page has to change.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Kat Downs

It's challenging but really fun. It's kind of the same type of thing. I don't think we fully understand it the same way when we started doing news online. On desktop Web, we thought about it in really limited ways. It took a lot of time and we're still exploring this sort of full breadth of things that we can do. That revolution is the same in mobile and we don't know what's coming. I think we really have to push hard to explore what's there and so that's where a lot of our emphasis is.

Michael O'Connell

And what's fascinating about this is, this is all happening in a newsroom. This is all happening in, you've got to get the news out in the 24-hour, instant — Boston, now there's a shooting and you've got to be building your graphics and making all these decisions in a very fast-paced environment. So, that's a whole 'nother level of craziness.

Kat Downs

Yeah. It totally is.

Michael O'Connell

It would be different if you were at the school or the lab or whatever and you were just building something for —

Megan Cloherty

Not as fun, though. Not as fun.

Kat Downs

We had some awesome mobile graphics, like during Boston. I mean, I wasn't seeing anyone else doing that, you know? And if you open something up from Twitter, a lot of times you're on your phone and you want to see something that's meaningful for you. You don't want to like pinch and zoom to get this tiny thing. I don't know. It's just a poor user experience most of the time.

Michael O'Connell

What's so terrible about it, especially for something that you might be doing, the fact that you're creating these incredibly useful things, just how digestible Twitter is. You look at it, it's gets shared a little bit and then you're moving on to the next thing. So you've put all this effort into something that's complex and has lots of different levels but may not have that much of a shelf life at that level.

Megan Cloherty

We're talking about responsive design too, I think it was David Wright at NPR, he was talking about how you really have to think about where people are going to be and what they're going to using to look at a specific thing. Because he said that when people are on tablets, they end up, willing to read longer articles. Whereas, if you throw something out on Twitter at noon, you know it's going to be at their desk. So, do you kind of design with that in mind, thinking how the user's going to be interacting with it.

Kat Downs

We try to, yeah. Right now, we're not doing a ton of differentiation between desktop, Web and tablet, but that's mostly because of resourcing constraints. Every time you're at a breakpoint, we already have print, desktop, Web and mobile.

Michael O'Connell

You don't have unlimited resources and time to do all this stuff?

Kat Downs

But yeah, we are thinking about how to get exactly the right amount of information so that people have time to read it, make them want to spend more time with it. I mean, when I look at stuff off Twitter, what I will do is open it up and then if it stays in my tab

open the whole day and I haven't read it, I put it on read later, like [Instapaper](#). And then, I may or may not ...

Michael O'Connell

It's like your Tivo.

Megan Cloherty

Fail.

Kat Downs

So, I definitely think like there's an attention, there's so much competing for people's attention, and so, there's a constant pressure to create things that draw that attention in a way that's — innovative is a word that's used way too much, but something different —

Megan Cloherty

Something cool.

Kat Downs

Something exciting that catches their eye.

Anna Miars

Something meaningful too, cause if you spend all this time creating all these things and people just glance at it for five seconds, think of all the work you've done to only get five seconds of people's time.

Kat Downs

Right.

Anna Miars

You actually want them to glean something from it, not just, "That's great, on to the next."

Michael O'Connell

So what about projects that have got a little bit more time to breathe for for you to think about long-term? Just pulling something local out, what did you guys do for the inauguration? You had a little lead up to that. You knew it was a local story that had a national impact. What was your thinking and planning for that?

Kat Downs

Well, we had a lot of resources around the newsroom on the [inauguration](#). I mean, we were just trying to own that story in every way. We had a lot of stuff coming out of our team around it. We did like a thing like a presidential history, looking at every presidential inauguration. We got a lot of traction from that. We did like a build your own speech thing, which was kind of fun. It was like a little, kind of like a trivia thing. We had a thing

about presidential balls. Probably the most, on the day off, we did a [GigaPan](#) with Facebook tagging that showed [Obama's swearing in](#) and that was really cool.

Megan Cloherty

GigaPan? What's a GigaPan?

Kat Downs

Basically, like a billion pixel image. It's a special camera.

Michael O'Connell

Oh yeah.

Kat Downs

That shoots hundreds of pictures and then you stitch it together and it creates this really, really high-resolution panoramic image that you can zoom way, way into and see everybody's faces. You can see like Katy Perry. It was really cool.

Michael O'Connell

You can put that on Facebook and you can invite people to tag it. You guys did that for the [season opener](#) for the Washington Nationals.

Megan Cloherty

I was going to say, they do it at ballparks.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, I tagged myself.

Kat Downs

We've done two of those and, I mean, that was great. That was really fun. So we had a lot of different projects. But yeah, we're just trying to do some things that we know are going to work and some things that we don't know if they're going to work, so we can kind of keep pushing ...

Megan Cloherty

See what happens.

Kat Downs

See what sticks.

Anna Miars

What drives how much effort you put into certain projects? Like, are you looking for a certain amount of views or like how do you sort of determine what gets a lot of attention and what's more of a, "We're going to try it, but we're not going to put like our full weight

behind it." Do you have metrics that you're trying to get and that is what determines your time?

Kat Downs

It depends on the project. You have to figure out what your success measures are and kind of baseline against that.

For me, when I kind of make assignments in the team, I'm thinking about, one, is it a newsy topic that people need to know about and are interested in? And that's the number one thing that we do as a news organization. You have to keep your focus there and there's a lot of other stuff going on and there's a lot of stuff that people want to do that's like not really in our core. So we try to keep the focus there. Those are the things people are going to click on a lot, they're going to want to read and they're going to want to share, because it's news that they can't get anywhere else.

The second thing is, if it brings new skills into the team, new technologies that we've never used before and the ability then in the future to use those skills on these types of newsy projects I'm talking about. So, somebody might spend a couple of weeks on a project with a new tool that they've never used before and that project may not get a ton of page views, but in my view it's successful because it's taught us how to do something that we then can use moving forward.

And then the third thing is relationship building. Working with somebody that they've never worked with before, a department that we've never worked with before and something good comes out of that that can snowball into more projects along the news lines that I talked about, then that's a success.

So page views are not the only thing that we look at when we think about whether a project is worth doing, especially because, I'm of the view that sometimes things catch on and then sometimes they don't and a lot of times that has to do with how they're played on the site and the promotion and all that kind of stuff, so I think you have to have sort of an independent way of evaluating the success of things and knowing what's good and then when you continue to create things that are good, then you can build an audience around that. That's really the goal, not kind of the flyby tons of hits on something that's kind of goofy, which is great. But that's not going to get sort of the core people that you want to see again and again. Those are the kind of people that we want to be on our site. So those are the things that I'm thinking about.

Megan Cloherty

Do you think the *Post* is doing a good job at highlighting your work versus highlighting their top stories or their features or whatever. I know they used to have the multimedia tab. That went away. And now, when you guys have stuff it's on the home page, but you feel like it's being presented like a supplemental element to the main story or do you feel like you're really kind of getting your own space?

Kat Downs

It depends on what the story is. We're trying to move away from a siloed model where you have a story page, then you have a graphic page and then you have a photo gallery and then you have a video page, which is something that we did for a long, long time, and it's a bad user experience and it's not an holistic story.

Megan Cloherty

Just because you go out and then you can come back in.

Kat Downs

Right. And that 's what creates that like stories on the front page and all the other doodads that go with it mentality.

The people that run our homepage, they love graphics, they love interactive stuff. So I definitely don't think like it's we get short shrift when things are getting promoted. But I do think that there's a news mentality where they often feel like the news is in the story and that's something that as visual journalists, we have to constantly, we have to push ourselves and the interpretation of our work so that people see that as a story and they recognize that a graphic with really detailed annotations is a story.

That's something we think about when we think about when we think about assignments. Do we need to do something that echoes exactly what's in a text story? That works really well in print. It doesn't work so well on the Web, because you then you have two pages with the exact same point and so they either need to be on the same page as a connected experience or maybe you should spend your time doing something else.

Megan Cloherty

We had something on WTOP this week where it was a photo gallery, but we chose to make the story in the captions, and we had all of these people who were like angry, I mean like very upset that they had clicked on the story and there was no story. And they kept saying, "Well, there's no story here." I'm like, "Well, you gotta go through." Even now we're like, "OK, maybe we should anchor it with a couple of paragraphs."

But, you think it's like the thinking is not quite there yet from the user experience? Or do you think it's more editors are like, "Eh, we still need text."

Michael O'Connell

Or the way you present.

Megan Cloherty

Yeah.

Kat Downs

Was it the users that were upset or the editors from your website?

Megan Cloherty

Actually both. The users were upset. We had all these comments, like, "Where's the story? There's just pictures here." But then, our promo guy came to us and was like, "Well, I went to go read the story and there's no story." And I just thought it was so interesting, because it wasn't just the outside, it was just people didn't get it.

Michael O'Connell

Well, that's the old, "Come with us. We're doing something different. Come with us. Follow us." And people aren't always ready to do that.

Megan Cloherty

Right, but I think this kind of what she's, not up against, that's not the right way to say it. But, I mean, you're trying to get people to think about news in a different way.

Anna Miars

They expect to see text on a page. That's just the kind of traditional thinking.

Michael O'Connell

Has the *Post* written a story entirely in the graphic element? Can you give an example of that?

Megan Cloherty

She's shaking her head yes.

Kat Downs

Yes.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, this is audio you need to ...

Kat Downs

We've done a lot of kind of what I like to call multimedia series, where it's like different kind of pieces that kind of fit together to tell a story. I mean, we've done a lot of standalone graphics, particularly around politics during the campaign season. Things that didn't run with, you know, I hate calling article pages a story because I think that perpetuates like the idea that text is a story. I like to call it the article, you know, the article page.

Michael O'Connell

The text portion of ...

Kat Downs

Because the story is what it is. It doesn't matter what form it's in. And so yeah, we have done a lot of those and our goal is to do more.

And our goal is to, for example, we just did Dan Keating and Emily Chow worked on this story about gun death and sort of looking at how homicides and suicides break down along racial lines and there was an interesting [data analysis](#). We had a really cool graphic about it and Dan wrote a story that was in the newspaper that ran with the graphic and it was also on the website. Instead of like having this story in this totally disconnected graphic, we took elements of that graphic and embedded them all throughout the story at the places where people want to see them.

This isn't a new thing. This is in blog posts every day all the time. But for some reason, we're just not doing it the way that we should and I don't think. ... People just want the story. I don't think that they care what form it's in. People love photo pages and they love photo galleries. I just think that sometimes we, as visual journalists, we need to work on the context of what we do. We need to try to make these things stand alone as much as they can, especially because people are coming to them from Twitter and whatever and you can't expect that once they arrive at this page that somehow they're going to find their back to this other page that has all this additional context that they might want to see. I mean in an ideal world and where I feel like we're going and sort of the digital news industry as a whole is going is into a world where we don't have these silos. We just have story experiences that include whatever needs to be in there.

Michael O'Connell

Do you think there's a prejudice that people sort of give more weight to text, that maybe the visual aspect, well that's lighter in a sense?

Kat Downs

That's the legacy of like how journalism was done for a long time.

Megan Cloherty

Even the photos, I mean, for the longest time were like extra, you know? Now, it's like people expect a photo in there.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah. And we've all seen a photo that is the story, that's the entire story, beginning, middle and end. That you look at it and say, "Wow. I understand completely what that means." Any text is just, you know, embellishment.

Kat Downs

Yeah, I think that there's ... the news industry has changed a lot. I mean, not just with the Web but starting before that in terms of not thinking of visual journalism as a service that they're there for people who do text reporting to come and say, "I want a graphic" or

"I want a video. I want a photograph." But to really think of it as it's own storytelling technique and I'm not sure we're totally there. That evolution is still happening. But I think that's a legacy thing, because the reporters, the people who get the information, many times go to the text. And we have to get those people.

Those are the people we need working on the visual stuff because they're the ones who know the stories. And unless as visual journalists we empower ourselves to be the storytellers, the reporters, we are invested in finding the information, we're invested in going out to the scene, discovering things, then we're always going to be seen as separate or like as a service or as like a doodad that goes with something else.

Megan Cloherty

That originates there.

Kat Downs

So I think that's something that we have to take control of and take charge of and put ourselves in the conversation and say, "This is my story idea, or this is something I want to report, or this is my idea for how we can work text and visuals together." And then, as that relationship evolves, the perception of visual journalism as somehow not as established or not as legit as text, it goes away.

And I've seen that during my time at the *Post*. Every time I work with somebody, I see the perspective change happen. It's like, "Wow, there's so much we can do with this kind of storytelling." And then they get excited and then they want to work together all the time. It's great, you know, but that's like you wish you didn't have to happen one by one, but in many ways it kind of does because you're opening new channels of communication, new ways of working that people haven't really experienced before.

Michael O'Connell

So, let's talk a little bit about non-linear storytelling. The fact that you've got a graphic element, something that you've created that every person who comes to that webpage is going to open up different things in a different way and see it a different way. How's that consideration in your design and in your planning?

Megan Cloherty

That's a good question, Michael.

Michael O'Connell

I know. That's my Ph.d. question.

Megan Cloherty

Good thought of the day.

Michael O'Connell

I get a cookie.

Kat Downs

The best pieces, I think, they do have a linear narrative. And if you want to pursue that linear narrative, you can and you don't have to do like the exploration. But then, if you want to, you can play with things and experiment with different filters and buttons or choose a specific location and adjust the story to yourself. But, we're trying not to produce completely exploratory pieces, because they don't do our job, which is to tell stories. And we did that for a long time. We're like, "Oh, data. This is great." And like, "Let's just smack it up and put some buttons on it and that's what people want." Our experience has not shown that. The more context you put around pieces, the more you show people what they should be looking for, where the interesting places are or where the interesting, you know, mixtures of different types of information are, then the more they want to stay.

Michael O'Connell

The more enriching the experience is.

Kat Downs

Yeah.

Megan Cloherty

So you kind of have to give them a path.

Kat Downs

Yeah.

Megan Cloherty

But they can go off it if they want.

Michael O'Connell

This is where it's important to have journalists.

Kat Downs

Exactly.

Anna Miars

Well it's the, "Who cares? The why?" If you don't give them that and they have to search that out, they may not figure out what it is and that can be really frustrating, like, "Why should I look at this? Why should I explore it? I don't get it."

Megan Cloherty

If you go the backwards way, then you're like, "What?"

Anna Miars

They're looking to journalists to give them something. They shouldn't have to do all the work in finding it.

Michael O'Connell

The context. The shortcuts. I mean, you get that big chunk of data from the government, maybe you create something that makes it easier to navigate, but unless you guide people to the where the most important things are, they're not going to understand why it's important to them. Again, the role of the journalist.

Megan Cloherty

As far as your background goes, I know that you're a photographer. Do a lot of artists end up doing this or do you find a lot of people have a more traditional journalism background and end up in graphics cause they're more visual. I guess my larger question is, if somebody's interested in getting into this, what would their background be? Or what would a good background be?

Kat Downs

I think it totally depends. Our department has people who started off as text reporters, computer-assisted reporters who just gravitated towards data stories and then data stories kind of naturally flow into visualization or mapping. And then we have several people who just have a background in design, storytelling through designs, storytelling through visualization and they started off on the visual side. We have a combination of paths to get to this point, and I think it's important to have people with both of those perspectives.

I think my background, so when I was in college, I studied photojournalism and multimedia, which was programming, design, video, all of that stuff. And I feel like that sort of helped me understand how each kind of media has different strengths. And when you understand their strengths, it's easier to make presentations that bring them all together because you're not trying to just duplicate everything in, one thing in a video and then a photograph and then a graphic, but rather use each thing for what it has the most value in. And so, for me that's been tremendously awesome to have a background like that because I have a really good sense of visually what works and what communicates. But, you we have people who didn't have a background like that at all. They were reporters and they just really liked the reporting that you can do and the kinds of stories that you can tell with graphics.

Megan Cloherty

But obviously it's important to have a familiarity with the different, like you said, the different mediums and how a story might lend itself better to data or video or whatever it is. Do you think when you're coming in as a graphic reporter that you should have a basic understanding of each medium and how you can report in each medium?

Kat Downs

I think so, yeah. I mean, if you're doing graphics, it's definitely important to understand what makes a good graphic and where there's opportunities to use graphics to tell stories and where there's really just not that much. And then you should just let something else do a better job.

I mean, there are just some stories that photography is just incredibly good at showing. And then there's some stories that are really, really hard to photograph, and that's where that relationship is and the kind of push-pull and, "We'll let photography tell this story" and "We'll let graphics tell this other story." So I do think that there is, if you're going to be a graphics reporter, it's really useful to have a perspective on what works in graphics.

Megan Cloherty

I feel like I ask really obvious questions, but it seems ...

Kat Downs

No, no, it's true, right? Yeah.

Megan Cloherty

... like something that people don't have a lot of experience in before you jump in. You've gotta jump in.

Kat Downs

Yeah. It's fascinating because so many people are interested in this right now and there's a lot of emphasis on the development side of it, the design and specifically the visualization side of it. But, the root of all that is information and specific kind of reporting that can create that information and process it and find stories in it. And we enormously need that skill set as well, not just the development, not just the design. So, I think that there is an opportunity for reporters who have interest in that kind of stuff to transition into more of looking at things in a visual way and, you know, there are jobs there. There are opportunities there. I don't think that that always, doesn't stick out to people as much as maybe it should.

Megan Cloherty

Right.

Kat Downs

As a potential path.

Michael O'Connell

Do you find that it's become easier to get people to give you assignments or ask for your help in something that's visual, or do you find that there've been situations where people have, you know, "Here, could you make a graphic for it?" And then suddenly realizing that's something that would be represented well in a graphic.

Megan Cloherty

You're like, "No, this is a video."

Michael O'Connell

"This is a video."

Megan Cloherty

Sorry.

Kat Downs

I mean, that's my job, right? To be like try to spot the opportunities and figure out, "Is this an opportunity or is it not?" And then also to encourage my team to come up with ideas for things that they want to do, because they have a different perspective on what works. And the closer relationships that they have with the content desks, then those ideas are coming to them. So it's not, people don't come over and they're like, "We want a chart." It's more like, "We have a story about this. How can we tell the story?" And then we say, "OK, well, maybe we can have the video team involved and they could do this part of it and we could do an explainer about this thing." Depending on the scope of the story, maybe you only want one, because you don't need everything for every story. Maybe just do one thing and we would decide together what that's going to be.

Anna Miars

Who's making the final, like let's you have a disagreement about what you think works and what doesn't. Who makes the final? Is it —

Kat Downs

About a graphic or about the story as a whole?

Michael O'Connell

Or do people trust you enough that you're the graphics editor.

Anna Miars

Right, like if you're working with a reporter and they say that you guys are having a conversation about what you think works. And you say one thing and they're like, "I really think I want this." Who actually, at the end of the day, says ...

Kat Downs

Well, if it's a graphics, then we would decide.

Anna Miars

OK.

Kat Downs

Whether it makes sense to do it. And I think that we have a really good, trusting relationship with people. Everybody at the Post is a professional and they're really good at what they do. And so, you have to trust people to know what they're good at. Now, if a reporter said, "This graphic totally doesn't tell the story that we're trying to tell," then of course we would, hopefully, we'd never get to that point. But if we did get there, we would say, "Hmmm. What happened here? Let's like evaluate what we're doing."

Megan Cloherty

Right.

Kat Downs

But, that like almost never happens. There's not really a lot of conflict between like, "I want a video." And then the video editor's like, "We're not doing that." It doesn't really happen.

Michael O'Connell

There's so much time and effort that goes into stuff, you're not going to waste yourself necessarily going down a dead end.

Kat Downs

Yeah, it's pretty clear that most of the time when people want to talk about projects, they just want to see what's possible, which is great. That's the kind of dialogue that we have that leads to discussing a lot of things and choosing the best things. I think people are understanding that maybe we don't have resources to do that one right now, but now we've had this conversation and the next time, maybe this idea will elevate and will be something that we can do.

Megan Cloherty

Changing gears real quick, I want to make sure talk about the National Security Reporting Project, because I know it's important to you. Are you on the board of that? Tell us about what you do there, your involvement.

Kat Downs

So, Josh Meyer and Ellen Shearer run this program and it's through Northwestern University, their Medill School, and they have a grant to do a program about national security reporting.

Each year, it's had a different theme and I've done it the past three years. And it's somewhere between like eight and 12 students come to D.C. They've technically already graduated. They're graduate students and they come here to do a fifth quarter and do this reporting and build a project off of it, which also involves not just text reporting but also graphics reporting, video reporting and the creation of a website, that kind of pulls it all together.

Megan Cloherty

OK. So it's a mentorship kind of —

Kat Downs

Yeah. So my job is basically visual editor of the site and I help, you know, teach some basic programming and design and thinking about how to tell stories in different ways and teaching some tools and things. Josh and Ellen are working with them on developing contacts with the government and like how to get all the good details. I'm kind of helping them think about reporting in a different way, which has been really fun.

Megan Cloherty

I was going to say, it's kind of nice. All of the teachers that we've spoken with feel like they have a more optimistic view on where we're going, because they're working with people who are excited about journalism, who want to learn more about what they're doing specifically. Do you feel that way?

Kat Downs

Yeah, teaching is great. I mean, teaching is really fun. It's a great way to kind of get outside the day-to-day grind of what you're doing. I mean, I think that most of the people who do what I do love their jobs, just cause it's awesome. What's not to love? New stories all the time. Changing technology. You kind of do what you want. It's great.

Michael O'Connell

Be creative.

Kat Downs

The teaching part of it is good because you can get outside of like what's happening in the profession and you can really see this sort of enthusiasm and, you know, it's exciting. There's still so much energy around studying journalism and trying to move it forward and trying to figure out where it's going to go. That's great.

Michael O'Connell

Let me ask you a real specific question down that line. Young journalist wants to get into this type of graphic design and presentation, what tools should they have in their toolbox?

Kat Downs

They should, I mean, it kind of depends on what they want. But if they want to be a jack of all trades, there's things that can get you there. Reporting, computer assisted reporting, specifically statistics, data analysis. Web design, user interface design. Programming, preferably Javascript, HTML, CSS. Database building. Possible Python, whatever, we use Django. Ruby, whatever people want to use.

Megan Cloherty

And you're in that every day? You're actually coding.

Kat Downs

Yeah. I mean, I'm not doing as much anymore because I'm doing a lot of editing. But, basically, my background is in design and development, and I designed and built these projects. And there are a lot of jobs around that. And then you know there's also jobs in illustration, 3D modeling, motion graphics, and that kind of thing. We have people on our staff who use those things as well. GIS, cartography, Web cartography with sort of non-traditional cartographic tools, sort of more the Web based, code-driven maps. I mean, there's a lot of different specializations within the specialization, which is kind of what makes it fun, but it —

Michael O'Connell

You don't need to have everything, but have some things or at least be thinking about, "Well, maybe if I have the opportunity to pick up this skill, maybe I should do that. It will help me."

Kat Downs

I mean, one thing that I kind of think is interesting and it was this way when I was in school and I think I feel it's still this way in a lot of journalism programs, is that they try to teach you a ton of different skills. And that can be useful cause it kind of gives you a survey of like what you could do.

Megan Cloherty

Right, what you like or what you don't like.

Kat Downs

But then you graduate and you're like OK at everything, but you're not like awesome at something, and it's harder to get a job when you're not awesome at something. And so, I think, what I did, which is, I went to the *Baltimore Sun*. I worked there for a year and a half. I then was able to take sort of all these general skills and figure out what I was good at, which was interactive design and development. And then I was able to find a job to specialize in that.

So I feel like you have to find a place to figure out what you want to do. Because you have to be really good at something in order to find a really good job. Unless it's at a small place and then you can continue to work there, where you can kind of do everything, which is fun in it's own way. But I just find that there's a lot of people send us portfolios and there's a lot of people who have a ton of different skills, but it's not really clear what they want.

Michael O'Connell

The direction.

Kat Downs

What kind of job they want. You have video in your portfolio. You have photography. You have design. You have print design. What's your goal? I think, when you're talking to potential people who might be hiring you that they want to know what you want to do —

Megan Cloherty

So that they can see what you're going to be great at for them. Right?

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Megan Cloherty

Interesting.

Michael O'Connell

Put a little thought into it.

Megan Cloherty

The last question always is, where do you feel like the industry is going? Do you feel like we're on a good path? Do you feel like, as far as graphics design goes and news graphics, we're headed in the right direction or do you think that, you know, is it all doom and gloom?

Michael O'Connell

The ship's sinking.

Megan Cloherty

We're all going to die.

Kat Downs

No, I mean, I touched on it a minute ago when I was talking about loving what I'm doing. And I think, we're in a great place. The stuff that you see now, the work, it's better than it has ever been. I feel like we're finally seeing a maturation in Web design and development. And it's really good stuff now. It's not kind of like, "Oh, we just discovered how to make things interactive and messy and doesn't have good UI [user interface]." The stuff you see now is really sophisticated and it's kind of like it's growing up.

And then we now have this new challenge which is mobile and like mini-screens and how do we manage that?

And I think it's a huge opportunity and it's exciting that it's not limited to traditional media companies. It's a wide open field. That's great because it kind of makes us think differently, motivates us, not be complacent and think, "Oh, I'm working at *The Washington Post*. We're always going to be this huge influence." Because it's not that way. And so, I

find that to be really fun and exciting. I think the future is bright. We just have to keep pushing and keeping trying to be better than you were the day before and learn from a lot of the experiments that are going on. Yeah, exciting.

Megan Cloherty

Kat, where can people find your work online? Or can they find you online?

Kat Downs

I'm online. I have about a thousand different social profiles. If you Google me, you'll find my website. It's Kat-Downs.com with a hyphen between Kat and Downs, because there's a musician in San Francisco that has the same name.

Michael O'Connell

Kat with a "K."

Kat Downs

Kat with a "K." And then I'm on Twitter, @katdowns. Instagram and Tumblr.

Megan Cloherty

All the places you should be.

Kat Downs

Everything. Google+, but I never use it.

Michael O'Connell

Don't you hate it when somebody comes up with a new social media platform?

Kat Downs

Yes.

Anna Miars

You feel obligated to join it.

Kat Downs

How can I wire this up to the ones I already have? But then I don't like to do that because I don't like to overpower people with like the same stuff. Pinterest, I'm on there.

Megan Cloherty

We can be here all day.

Kat Downs

You name it, I'm on there.

Megan Cloherty

Well thank you for joining us. We appreciate it.