Local Graphics for Local People

An Honors 499 Thesis

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Abstract

On average, television news stations change the look of their on-air graphics once every three to four years. The same standard should apply to student news stations, especially at a university that prides itself on mirroring the professional world. During my time as an immersive learning student working for NewsLink Indiana, I noticed our graphics and animated show opens looked a little outdated.

NewsLink Indiana is an immersive learning experience through the Department of Telecommunications. It gives students who want a career in the news business a chance to experience the day-to-day workings of a professional newsroom. Students work as a team to shoot, edit, write, and report four news briefs every day for TV and Web.

When I did my research, I discovered that the last time NewsLink updated its graphics was in September 2004. The graphics before that were the original graphics from when the program began in 2003. Clearly an update was due. I used my knowledge of Adobe After Effects, Photoshop, and Illustrator to create a totally new look for NewsLink Indiana that brought it up to speed with news stations around the country.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Chris Flook for being my advisor and meeting with me on top of teaching several motion graphics classes and outside activities. He was always willing to take a look at what progress I made and offer any suggestions on how to make my graphics easier or look better.

I would also like to thank Tim Underhill and Sy Jenkins, managers of NewsLink Indiana, for giving me further advice. They were my mentors while I was enrolled in NewsLink, and it was great to see their positive reactions to the changes I made.

Thanks, of course, to Katie Bostdorff who stayed up late nights with me, while I designed these graphics. She put up with my nerdiness and was always willing to watch my graphic designs and offer criticism. I also appreciate her staying up late nights while in Indonesia and helping me edit this large paper.
Author's Statement

The redesign of these motion graphics came steps: Research, Planning, Physical Design, Alteration, and Execution.

Research

I began my research simply by watching the old animated show opens and closes. I wanted to parallel this style as closely as possible. This was mainly because I didn’t want the change to be too jarring to viewers once we made the switch. A news station’s particular look (known as its “branding”) is vital. People often evaluate the look and feel of a newscast based on the color scheme and graphic look as opposed to what stories the station does. Any sudden change, even a subtle one, can alter viewers’ opinions of the program and may do more harm than good.

Another reason I closely studied the old graphics is because I wanted to mimic some of the animations and styles that the previous designer used. When it comes to projects that involve my major, I thrive on learning techniques and tricks from other people.

I wanted to use the same video clips that were in the old version, as well as some of the graphic transitions, such as when the words “Local NEWS” changes to “Local PEOPLE.” I knew if I could insert some of the old animation styles into the new graphics, it would provide a sense of familiarity between the old and new styles.

While maintaining some of the old format was important to me, I remembered that the reason I was undertaking this task was to renew the outdated look. So I knew I had to create my own modern style as well. Research for this was as simple as watching news broadcasts on television. I watched local news stations such as WTHR, RTV6, WISH-TV, and FOX59 the most. I also paid attention to national news such as NBC Nightly News, CBS Evening News, and even shows like The Daily Show and The Colbert Report. They all represent the state of modern graphic design and they were all important in generating ideas for my new design.
Planning

Once I had generated several ideas from watching these shows for a few weeks, I began putting my ideas to paper. At times, inspiration would suddenly strike me as I was watching a news show, and I had to draw it out before I forgot it.

This is where I got my idea for the lower third graphic. I later drew the above sketch out in Photoshop, and it became the final lower third design. A lower third is also called a “name key.” It occasionally shows up in the bottom section of the screen to identify who is on camera or where the story is, as shown here:
In comparing these two pictures, you will notice a difference between the sketch for the new lower third verses the look of the old lower third. I wanted the new graphics to be a little less flat. In the original there is no depth to them, and it looks like a two-dimensional label at the bottom of the screen. The curved lines were intended to give the new lower third a “stacked” look so it would appear that there were multiple levels to it.

Very early on, I noted the presence of three-dimensional space in modern graphic animations. Everything seemed to be more real because it had depth and movement in a simulated 3D world. The current NewsLink animations had none of that. I saw this as the biggest reason our graphics looked so outdated. I knew that no matter what my final animations looked like, they would have depth and a 3D look to them.

So I began with what came easiest to me, which was the designing of the lower third and over the shoulder (OTS) graphic. OTS graphics are often the most well known thing about a newscast. They supplement what the anchor says with a picture and a title. They come up multiple times in a newscast and before almost every story. I spent the most time on the OTS because I knew it would be the one thing everyone saw the most.

I went through several styles of OTS backgrounds at first. I wanted my OTS style to match the lower third style I had created, so I came up with this “swooping” style for my OTS background:
It quickly became apparent that the edge I designed was too "hard." That is to say, there was a definite line between where the graphic was and where it ended. The previous OTS had more of a gradient fade, as shown below.

I liked this fadeout idea better, so I adapted that to my OTS design.
Now that I had a rough idea what the OTS background would look like, I had to work on the OTS itself. This is the actual picture and text that is seen. Again I picked a curved design at first.

I decided this was a good design to go with at first. So I began importing all of my graphics from Photoshop into After Effects so I could animate them. However, I continued studying the old NewsLink graphics, and I realized that the OTS looked like it connected to the background. My new design looked simply like it was floating on top of the background – there wasn’t much of a connection between the two. So I went back into Photoshop and tried to figure out how to get the two to connect.
As shown above, the old OTS graphic had lines around it, which I think helped a lot. The lines ran up and around the graphic itself and actually separated the blue from the gold, as shown three photos above. The lines were very subtle but they tied everything together nicely. I experimented with lines around my OTS and decided that the top half of my OTS background would be tied together with the OTS graphic. Just like in the old graphic, the lines would provide a boundary where the left side of the animation would stop.

After about 4 months, things really began taking shape.
Design

The Design phase of the project didn’t start until Spring 2009 when I became an immersive learning student in NewsLink. Everything up to this point took place before December 2008 while I had time to brainstorm. I knew Spring 2009 would be the best time to do my designing because I would be immersed in NewsLink all day Monday through Friday.

I began my After Effects design by working on the animated show open. This would serve as the introduction to all three news briefs as well as the web brief. This was my first chance to impress our viewers, as it is the first thing they see in the newscast.

I had a few discussions with people on various broadcast and graphic design websites, the most prominent of which being www.creativeCOW.com. CreativeCOW stands for “Creative Communities of the World,” and industry professionals in all different disciplines and from all over the world subscribe to the Forum. First I asked a very basic question:

“What kinds of animation styles do you see in the professional news world? Are there any techniques or new animated elements I should use in my redesign?”

Two answers overwhelmingly overpowered the others. The first one I already knew - every news station was using some form of 3D animation, however subtle it may be. People simply want things to look as realistic as possible now. The best way to do that was to incorporate some feel of 3D space into the animated world.

Another answer I got was to use a 3D stroke. At first I had no idea what this was, but after I researched a few examples, I realized I had seen these all over the place and never realized:

3D STROKE
As shown above, 3D stroke gives the illusion of a streak of light or a line going off into the distance. It can be made to wrap around objects and go whichever way you want it to go simply by following a predetermined path. Creating this effect takes a special program made by a company called Trapcode. Once I had the program and began creating these light beams, I created a curved beam similar to the ones shown above.

I decided that this was how I was going to bring a lot of my text on and off the screen. The beam would act as a pathway that the text would follow. NewsLink’s franchise is “Local News about Local People” so I wanted these words to fly in and out using the stroke, as shown here:

![Image of 3D stroke with text]

The text of the counties and cities shown below the 3D stroke was another element from the show’s old open that I wanted to keep. NewsLink Indiana covers nine counties around Delaware County and it was important for all major cities to be represented. Similar to how the cities and counties appear to curve around the corner of the stroke, so did the “Local News” and “Local People” text.

Also in the above picture is a 3D model of the NewsLink Indiana logo. I created this with a program called Zaxwerks 3D Invigorator. This program uses traced outlines of a two-dimensional logo and gives them three-dimensional size and depth.

So after putting in the 3D stroke, a 3D NewsLink logo, and the text elements, I had a good start, and my animated show open was beginning to take form.
However, the background was noticeably bare. I needed some background elements to make the foreground pop out a little more. I wanted some stock footage, such as generic video of news stories, to come into play. I didn’t have a clever way to subtly work these things into the background. When I was experimenting with Zaxwerks 3D Invigorator, I created some rotating 3D logos that I liked. I planned to use them in my animated OTS background, but I thought a nice way to tie the graphics together would be to use that same rotating logo in the show open.

A great way for me to incorporate video into the open was to put the video INSIDE the letters of the big spinning logo. To do this I experimented with something called “Blending Modes,” which causes overlapping elements to interact differently with each other. Some blending modes will take all the black out of a foreground image, others will create a blended semi-transparent look between the two elements, and others will only insert the background image in the area where the foreground image is present. Any “holes” in the foreground image will show up as “holes” in the background image, as shown here:

I combined this effect with another copy of the actual spinning logo to make it appear as if the video was projected onto the NewsLink logo.
All that was left now was a splash of color. I decided to stay with basically the same color scheme that the previous graphics had, again, for the sake of familiarity. Except instead of a blue and orange-gold color scheme I decided to brighten up the orange-gold and take out the orange tint. This brightened my composition up a lot and, along with changing the color of the NewsLink logo, helped the foreground really pop from the background.

For other animated show opens like the Weather Brief, I simply made slight changes
to the color of the 3D stroke and what video I put on the NewsLink logo in the background.

![Image of the logo with 3D elements and text](image)

I finished all of the elements in April 2009. I was lucky to be enrolled in NewsLink because I was in the newsroom all day, and I could upload the graphics the day I finished them to see what they looked like on TV.

However, this is also the point where I ran into some problems.

**Alteration**

The biggest problem was my color scheme. I quickly learned why the previous designer used more of an orange-gold instead of just gold. Computer monitors have a different chemical makeup than televisions, so certain colors show up differently. In this case, what showed up as gold on my monitor turned out to be a very bright "highlighter yellow" on a TV monitor. It wasn't very visually appealing.

It was an easy fix, but it was the biggest problem because that gold color was in almost every animated element I created. I had to take all of my animations and import them to a video editor so I could color correct them. I turned the gold more of an orange-gold again, while trying not to completely revert back to the old color scheme.

Toning the yellow colors down a bit seemed to help. However, it did take a few tries to get the correct color mix. Fixing all the colors and checking them on a TV monitor took about a week to complete.

Another minor change was the color of the NewsLink logo. Tim Underhill pointed out to me that I was using a black logo, and usually it is white. Not fixing something as small as this would have been one of those jarring changes that might have made the graphics look wrong. I had to change the "NLI" from black to white.
Unfortunately, the only way to do this was to go into After Effects and change the 3D logo in Zaxwerks 3D Invigorator. This was a bit aggravating because it seemed like such a small difference, but it changed the look of the entire graphics package. After another week I had all the colors changed, and I was ready to import them and use them in the show.

**Execution**

Uploading and debuting my graphics was fairly simple. I just picked a day that I was in the newsroom all day and spent the time uploading all the lower thirds and sending my animations to our playback server. I made sure that when I sent my videos to the playback server, I kept a copy of the old videos, just in case something happened and I needed to temporarily revert to the old graphics.

I picked a Monday to debut the new graphics because we had a break over the weekend and I felt that a Monday would be the best day to present changes to the look of our show. Broadcasting the new graphics went off without a hitch, and it was a great feeling to see a semester of my work finally being used at the end of April 2009.

As far as viewer feedback goes, we didn’t receive any word either way. I took this as a good thing. Usually the only time news outlets will hear from their viewers is when they don’t like what they see. So in this case, no news was good news.

**Conclusion**

I continued to work on this project even into my last semester of college. Recently the TCOM department decided to switch to High Definition (HD), which meant I needed to update everything to HD, since I designed my graphics in Standard Definition (SD). If not, all of NewsLink’s graphics would be the wrong size and it would look terrible. After the switch to HD it wouldn’t even be possible to revert to the old graphics package since they, too, are in SD.

The process of upgrading to HD involved going back into After Effects and changing the size of all of my videos. Regular SD dimensions are 720x480 pixels, while regular HD dimensions are 1920x1080. Because I had so many elements in my videos, I had a lot of sizes to change. Luckily I was not on a deadline, as TCOM hasn’t completely converted to HD yet, and NewsLink still airs in SD. I finished the HD upgrade in April 2010, but it was a reminder to me that sometimes projects aren’t truly ever “finished.”

Overall, I learned the most about graphic design through this project than any other class at Ball State. I took the Motion Graphics class, and that is what really got me interested in After Effects and motion graphic design. NewsLink Indiana was an immersive learning experience into the workings of a newsroom, but for me it was also an immersion into broadcast graphic design.
Upgrading to HD went relatively quickly because of the fact that I was familiar with how to properly format all my graphics. I learned the correct way to do everything through the process of creating NewsLink's brand new look.

I feel like I genuinely helped my future as well. It's a great resume builder to be able to say that I redesigned an entire graphics package by myself as a student. I learned so many different tricks and methods to design using Photoshop and After Effects just by exploring the programs on my own. I feel like my organization and efficiency have greatly improved as well. I know how to better manage projects with large amounts of data because of this experience.