

Web Extras Toolkit

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So you've decided to try your hand at preparing a few web extras for your stories, but how do you get started? What tools do you need? How much will it cost?

While there are many ways to either dabble or dig in, here are a few suggestions to point you in the right direction.

If you'd like additional copies of this document, it's posted online at gravitymedium.com — just search for "web extras toolkit" if you don't see it.

For another take on new media tools, check out this new post at MediaShift:
http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2008/04/diy_nationcheap_editing_tools.html

Photos

On the web, images really matter, especially when telling a complex or just plain interesting story. And Alaska is a great place to be even a total amateur, whether shooting landscapes or unique images of our cultural heritage. If you want to routinely include original photos in your web work, you'll need a few things to get started.



• **Digital Camera**

- lots of choices, even starting under \$100
- simple point-and-shoots do a good job these days, certainly for the web
- many cell phones now have embedded cameras that may work well (image quality varies widely, though)
- higher price usually offers more features, but not necessarily better images
- don't buy into the "more megapixels = better photos myth" — anything of 4 or 5 megapixels is just fine; more might just be wasteful

• **Accessories** (optional)

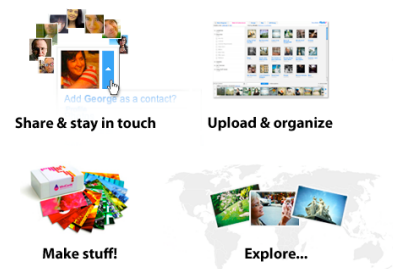
- protective case
- large memory card or multiple memory cards
- memory card reader (some cameras you can connect directly to your PC, but that may be a pain; a card reader allows you to pop out the card and read it without the camera present)
- mini tripod / large tripod / monopod (check out joby.com for a unique option)
- extra battery

• **Photo Organization and Editing — PC**

- you'll need to be able to grab all the images from your camera and store them in an organized fashion; you also need to be able to do some simple editing
- editing needs are likely limited to cropping, resizing for e-mail or web publication, a little non-technical color correction plus some titling, note-taking and keyword tagging
- Adobe Photoshop Elements (Windows or Mac), about \$85 — adobe.com
- iPhoto (Mac), free with Mac or \$80 in iLife package — apple.com
- Picasa (Windows), free download — picasa.com
- most of these will allow you do more than just store and organize — you can print, create slideshows, books and more

• Online Photo Organization, Storage and Sharing

- Why store / publish photos online?
 - if your web site isn't well-suited to large photos, you can post a small version and link to the large one stored in your online account
 - photos stored online are automatically backed up and managed for you; no local storage required
 - big social media bonuses — photos can be shared, tagged (keywords), searched, commented, etc.
 - a group of users can share a single photo collection online, eliminating duplicate file storage, lost photos
 - easy to create online slideshows
 - photo collections often include RSS feeds, allowing others to subscribe to your updates
- **Flickr** — flickr.com
 - free accounts to get you started (limited)
 - paid accounts are unlimited for \$25/year
 - highly popular service with active community
 - lots of utilities and plugins for your PC to make uploading faster and easier
- **Picasa** — picasa.com
 - integrates with downloadable Picasa software (Windows only)
 - features similar to Flickr
- **Adobe Photoshop Express** — photoshopexpress.com
 - in public beta as of April 2008
 - free accounts get 2GB of storage
 - works like a local application, but is completely online
 - not recommended for slow Internet connections
- **SmugMug** — smugmug.com
- **PhotoBucket** — photobucket.com
- [lots more; just search online or ask friends]



Audio

Even radio reporters can use the web to tell more of the story than fits in traditional broadcast time slots. And print or video folks may want to add an intimate dimension to their reporting that only audio can offer. There are three important parts to using audio as an extra: recording, editing and publishing. Here's what you'll need...



Recording Audio

- This is a big topic I can't tackle in a short tools listing because you can start doing audio at a wide variety of quality levels and in a variety of settings — there are many types of recorders, microphones, cables, etc. But there are lots of resources online to help narrow your options. I recommend you start here:
 - <http://transom.org/tools/>
- Additionally, you can do online searches for **podcasting** tools and recommendations. One resource to get you started:
 - <http://mashable.com/2007/07/04/podcasting-toolbox/>
- You can also find books about podcasting that may be useful if you get really serious about producing audio extras regularly.
- If you'd like to record phone calls, possibly calls with multiple participants, you may need special gear. Or you can try using **Skype** (skype.com) along with a plugin for your PC that will record the call audio. Visit the Skype site, use their online help, or do an online search for "skype recording" and you'll find several options.
- One last note... If you blog, you can record audio from your cell phone (or any phone) and post the resulting recording automatically on your blog. It's called **Utterz** — utterz.com.

TIP:

Podcasting resources are usually aimed at a non-pro audience; therefore the solutions tend to be cheaper to buy and easier to use.

Editing Audio

- Like anything else, capturing raw material is not enough. You'll need to be able to trim your audio down to usable clips, get rid of unwanted noise and so on.
- **GarageBand** (Mac only), free with new Mac or \$80 in iLife suite — apple.com/ilife/garageband. It's aimed more toward music production, but you can use it for spoken audio as well. It's multi-track capabilities are also pretty slick, especially for a free package.
- **Audacity** (Windows and Mac), free — audacity.sourceforge.net. Lots of people swear by Audacity. Personally, I've sworn *at* Audacity in the past, so I'm not a big fan. But it is free and it's improved over the years.
- **Adobe Soundbooth** (Windows and Mac), about \$200 — adobe.com. Soundbooth is aimed at folks that need fairly simple audio editing functions, so

it's easier to use for non-pros than Audition, it's big brother. Kinda pricey at \$200, but it's a solid choice.

- **Adobe Audition** (Windows and Mac), about \$350 — adobe.com. This is a professional multi-track audio editing package. I wouldn't bother with this package unless you need the features or are primarily doing audio editing every day in your job. Good stuff, but it's probably overkill just for "extras" work.

Publishing Audio

- Publishing audio can be easy or hard — it's highly dependent upon how your web site is configured, what software is already installed, and so on. I can't easily advise each of you how best to publish audio on your site, so check with your web person or team to figure this out for your site.
- In most cases, however, it's as simple as taking your recorded/edited audio, converting it into a web-optimized format (such as MP3) and uploading the resulting file to your web site.
- I recommend using the MP3 audio format for virtually everything you publish for public consumption. It's a virtually universal standard for audio and it's readable by every major platform. What settings to use for your MP3 is debatable and beyond the scope of this document.

- **About Podcasting**

- This topic seems to really confuse people. A few points to note:
 - podcasting is just automated media subscribing and downloading; a piece of software on your computer (e.g. iTunes) simply grabs new episodes when they are published online
 - podcasts can contain audio or video, including video of HD quality
 - you don't have to have an iPod to subscribe to a podcast
 - there are many ways to find and subscribe to podcasts, but probably the most popular is iTunes (Windows and Mac) — apple.com/itunes
 - Learn more here...
<http://www.apple.com/itunes/tutorials/#podcasts>
- To promote your podcast — if you have one — you should definitely promote it on your web site, but you should also add it to the iTunes podcasting library, where lots of people can find it easily.
- To create / automate / publish your podcast feed, you'll likely need technical help from your web person. It's not that hard, but figuring it out isn't for technical neophytes. I highly recommend using FeedBurner — feedburner.com — as part of your solution.
- For more about publishing audio...
<http://ourmedia.org/node/273304>

Video

You don't have to work for a TV station to create video and publish it, as many newspapers across the country have proven and radio outlets are learning. Video isn't right for every story every time, but when you can capture something unique or tell a story that involves real-time action, video can be a great add-on.

Recording Video

There are more ways to record video today than ever before. Just browse through Best Buy and you'll quickly be overwhelmed. I'll touch on the major options here just to get you started.

• Prosumer and Low-End Professional Gear

- This is for the really serious folks that basically want to do TV-quality work on a daily basis and have the bucks to make it work. In this zone you'll spend around \$5,000 to \$10,000 on one camera and accessories. I actually don't recommend this unless you're a pro or semi-pro shooter.
- For the record, you can find this gear from Canon, Sony and Panasonic.

• Consumer Camcorders

- There are some killer video cameras these days for around \$1,000 and some pretty good ones below that level, many of which will shoot some variation of "HD" video. You can pick these up online, through Costco, Best Buy and local camera/video specialty shops.
- Price range to consider for the base HD camcorder is about \$750 to \$1,500. Accessories should run an extra \$250.
- Non-HD camcorders can be had for less, ranging from \$350 to \$600; non-HD gear is fine if your primary outlet will be online.
- Look for an external MIC input feature. The built-in microphones are usually quite bad on camcorders and will typically pick up camcorder noise (especially on tape or hard drive cameras). Then buy an external mic for better audio.

• Recording Medium: Tape / Hard Drive / DVD / Flash Memory

- One of the key decisions you'll have to make in choosing a camera is what you'll record onto. The tradeoffs are complex, but here are the major advantages of each:
 - **DVD:** not much to crow about — skip this one
 - **Hard Drive:** lots of storage without swapping media; good HD performance

TIP:

The microphone is actually more important than you think. Bad audio can easily ruin perfectly good video.



- **Flash Memory:** adequate storage per card; can use multiple cards; good HD performance
- **Tape:** best HD performance, can use multiple tapes
- Canon is quite popular in this category.
- Panasonic has some great and some not-so-great machines. Watch the reviews.
- Sony is also popular.
- Keep in mind you'll need various cables, card readers or other devices to get the video out of your camera and into your computer. That all depends on the camera you choose and the computer you have.
- **Digital Cameras**
 - The same digital camera you use for snapshots is nowadays likely to have a video mode. Quality can vary, but if the camera is current, it's likely to do a good job, especially for web video. Audio is another matter -- the microphones on digital still cameras are usually far worse than the already-bad ones on camcorders.
 - In any case, try shooting video with your still camera. It might be just fine.
- **The Flip video camera — theflip.com**
 - This is a new, radically simple device. It takes traditional TV-quality video and does it with — literally — one-button simplicity.
 - One problem: the mic is weak. Either record audio on a separate device and sync the audio and video later, or only shoot videos that don't need lots of audio capture.
 - Cool features: it has its own simple video editing software stored right on the camera and includes features to quickly upload your video to YouTube and other services.
 - David Pogue, technology columnist for the New York Times, has been using one of the Flip cameras for a year, shooting all his own video, each of which are published on the NY Times web site.
 - Highly recommended, especially if you're just getting started and would like to experiment with video. Prices range from \$100 to \$180.
- **Cell Phones**
 - Some cell phones can capture decent video. Not many, but some.
 - The most remarkable is probably the Nokia N95 smartphone, which, with the right cellular connection, can stream live video from the phone to the web, making its own a live video journalist wherever the right signals reach.
 - The Nokia N95 is easily \$600 in an unlocked version and without a service contract. At the moment, it's unclear to me if you could use the live video streaming feature in Alaska (our cell network may not be up to snuff yet).



- **Get. A. Tripod. Seriously.**

- One last note for video. Get a tripod, no matter what you use to shoot video. Hand-held may seem “edgy” and naturalistic, but it quickly wears on the viewer and doesn’t generally add to the story.
- So get a tripod, even if it’s just a tiny one. Then use it. Every time.

Streaming Video

There’s recording video, editing it, then publishing it later. And then there’s streaming video live.

- First, you’ll need a video camera. Probably one that hooks to your PC.
- Second, if you’re not using something like the Nokia N95 that can stream on its own, you’ll need a computer and possibly some software to capture the video and send it to the Internet in real time.
- Third, you’ll need a live Internet connection of sufficient speed to make the video worth watching.
- Finally, you’ll need a way to publish / multiple your stream. Here are the three biggest names in live streaming video right now...
 - Qik — qik.com
 - UStream — ustream.tv
 - Stickam — stickam.com
- In most cases, the live streaming services will record your event for later re-streaming or download.

Editing Video

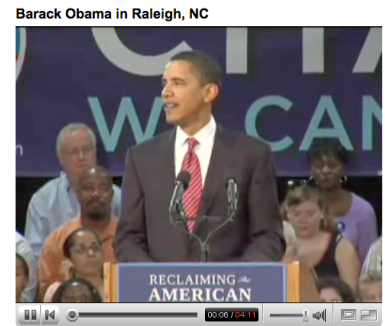
- Lots of options here. Unless you’re getting really, really fancy, these simple ones will do just fine.
- Also note that some of the photo editors noted above can create slideshows that can be turned into videos. Similarly, movie editors can be fed photos and then you can create slideshows.
- iMovie (Mac only), free or \$80 with iLife suite — apple.com/ilife/imovie/
- Windows Movie Maker (Windows only), free with Windows XP or Vista
- Adobe Premiere Elements (Windows only), \$75 alone or \$125 in bundle with Photoshop Elements — adobe.com
- QuickTime Pro (Windows or Mac), \$30 — apple.com/quicktime/pro/
- You may also need a video transcoding package to take a video file of one type and turn it into another.
 - VisualHub (Mac only), \$23 — techspanion.com/visualhub/
 - MPEG Streamclip (Mac or Windows), free — squared5.com
- Finally, you might need to rip video from a DVD (watch out — this might be illegal; consult with your corporate attorney before proceeding). You can use a free program called HandBrake (Mac or Windows), free, to do this — handbrake.fr



Publishing Video

- **youtube.com**

- Say what you will about YouTube, but it's the largest single video viewing audience on the planet.
- Accounts and uploads are free. Videos are limited to 10 minutes or 100MB in size, unless you have another (paid) agreement in place.
- Strong social networking features on the site, though the audience can be a bit unwelcoming.
- Embedding feature is killer — it allows you to easily embed the video on your own web site(s) and users can take your video and place it elsewhere as well.
- The great thing about YouTube and the similar services noted below is that you don't have to (generally) pay for video storage or streaming bandwidth and your videos can reach a much wider audience via Google search and embedded video features.



- **blip.tv**

- similar to YouTube, but has a more integrated advertising sales model
- can handle higher resolution / higher quality video than YouTube
- free account sign-up and usage, up to some daily limits and file sizes; paid accounts are (relatively) unlimited

- **vimeo.com**

- yet another variation on a video hosting service

- **brightcove.com**

- similar to the others, but now is a 100% paid service

- **Your Web Site**

- You'll probably need help publishing video on your site, but there are free pieces of web software that make publishing on your own site easier.

Links

Links don't really need an explanation, I hope. But there's two things you should know about when it comes to sharing web addresses (links, bookmarks) as web extras.

First, many web addresses are very, very long and are hard to remember and are hard to publish online in a written fashion in e-mail or on web sites. Sometimes you just wish the URL (the address) were much shorter. In that case, turn to a URL-shortening service. For example, TinyURL — **tinyurl.com**.

Second, you may want to share your links / bookmarks either with the general audience or with colleagues. This is called "social bookmarking" and you can learn more about what that means with this brief online video:



Social Bookmarking in Plain English

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x66lV7GOcNU>

The most popular social bookmarking service is del.icio.us (or **delicious.com**). This is a free service and can be used alone or can be used with professional or personal colleagues, friends, family, or the audience. Your audience can share links with you and you share links with them.

Delicious bookmark collections can even be turned into RSS feeds and daily blog posts automatically.

Documents / Maps

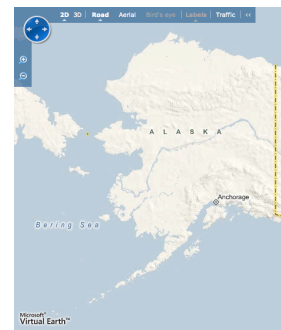
If you can post photos online, you can probably post documents or maps. Just a couple notes to share here...

Use PDF

- First off, I recommend you post all documents as PDF documents, not Word or Excel or PowerPoint. There may be times when it makes sense to publish the original sources, but PDF is best because it's universally readable using the free Adobe Reader software.
- Macs can create PDFs simply by printing and choosing to save the output as a PDF, not to actually send it to a printer.
- Windows machines can do this, too, but need to install an extra piece of software to do it. Luckily, there are free utilities that offer this feature.
 - PDFCreator — sourceforge.net/projects/pdfcreator/
 - [there are lots more, some paid, some free, but this one seems to work well]

Embed Maps or Links to Maps

- There are lots of mapping services out there that will allow you to embed portions of a map or generate a link straight to any location on the surface of the Earth.
 - maps.google.com
 - maps.yahoo.com
 - mapquest.com
 - maps.live.com
- Embedding the maps into your web site might be a little more tricky than you'd like to handle. Chat with your web person or team to figure out what approach makes the most sense on your site.
- Most of the services above also include the ability to view satellite images, which can be helpful in illustrating your story.
- Keep in mind that "stealing" the map imagery by taking a screen shot may break copyright laws. "Fair Use" is a squirrely principle and may not protect you in all cases.



Blogs

Okay. Let's not have a fight about blogger vs. journalists. That's another session (or every day at work, I suppose!). Let's just acknowledge that blogs are here to stay and can play a valuable role in your news operation in many different ways. I won't go into the why-or-why-not discussion, I'll just touch on the tools here.

WordPress.com

- There are lots of free blogging services online and WordPress is one of the biggest with over 1,000,000 blogs already setup and running. They have a good product, it's free (unless you'd like some of their extras), easy to use and popular.
- Note that this is WordPress.COM — this is the free, hosted service. I'll touch on the downloadable version next.



WordPress.org

- This isn't a blogging service, this is blogging software you can run on your own server (you'll need help with this) and then tweak as much as you like. Being open source software, you can even modify the internal code.
- In addition to the single blog software package, they also offer WordPress mu — it's for anyone that wants to host their own multi-blogging service. With one installation of WordPress mu, you could offer employees, readers or others their own free blog.

Blogger.com

- Owned by Google, this is another huge, free blogging service.

TypePad.com

- Another (very big) free blogging service.

Tumblr.com

- This is something different than all the others.
- Tumblr is intended as a hybrid blogging platform that allows you to sort of collect things from around the web and post them in short form through this pseudo-blogging system. It's (obviously) hard to explain, but basically this is a way to blog in a small, simple way without having to slog through all the preferences and settings that you handle with the bigger systems like Blogger or WordPress. Check it out if blogging sounds like too much trouble but you still want to share a few things once in a while.

RSS Feeds and E-Mail

If you're using a **blogging** platform or **Flickr** or **YouTube** or **Facebook** or **Tumblr** or **Twitter** or a host of other online services, you're already generating **RSS** feeds. What's that? Well, it's a sort of subscription mechanism for the web. If you subscribe to my RSS feed, you'll automatically get updated when there's new information available from me.



I won't go into how to create them manually, as that's really technical. But there are two crucial things you should be using with respect to RSS feeds. One is for you and your work as a journalist. The other will help you publish your work to the world.

Background

Every major news source and every blogger these days generates an RSS feed that is populated with the latest updates from them. The New York Times has RSS feeds for every subject category in the paper and often for specific columnists. NPR has tons of RSS feeds so that if you want to know what was on *Fresh Air* today, all you need do is subscribe to that RSS feed and you'll know without ever having to visit the NPR web site. RSS is a way for content on the web to reach beyond web sites, keeping readers / listeners / viewers engaged with content even if they never visit the host web sites.

RSS in Plain English

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0klgLSxGsU>

For journalists, RSS is a great time-saver, if you know how to use it.

Google Reader

If you, as a journalist, are not already using Google Reader (or a similar RSS feed reader), you need to get going right away. This is a tremendous time saver that will help you stay on top of subject areas you cover in your work across a much wider array of sources than you're used to following.

Just go to **google.com/reader** and sign up for an account (you may have to sign up for a Google Account first, but no worries — it's all free).

They have some great online docs to explain how to find RSS feeds on the sites you visit, or you can search for feeds right inside Google Reader.

If you're already using Google Alerts (from Google News), you can combine your Google Alerts with Google Reader to get those updates not in your e-mail Inbox, but in Google Reader, alongside all your other news-related subscriptions.

FeedBurner

While Google Reader will help you subscribe to RSS feeds, FeedBurner — **feedburner.com** — will help you create or clean up or promote your own RSS feeds and then track their usage.

FeedBurner does not create original RSS feeds — it takes some variation of an RSS feed that's been generated by your web server or other system and then adds features, cleans up the code, and allows you to track usage. Most likely your web site software or blogging software will generate the source RSS feed. You simply point FeedBurner to that source, then have FeedBurner add whatever features make sense for your readers / users.

RSS Feeds... via E-Mail

FeedBurner allows you to **create an e-mail subscription system** for your web subscribers. If some folks are not comfortable setting up a Google Reader (or similar) account, they can just subscribe to your RSS updates via e-mail instead. Remarkably, this is a free service! After setting it up, you just post a link on your web site to promote the availability of the e-mail subscription.

Twitter



Started in October 2006, Twitter has quickly risen as a major new force in new media circles. Some call it a micro-blogging platform. Some consider it a replacement for Instant Messaging. Everyone sees it a little bit differently.

The gist of the platform:

- Posts are limited to 140 characters
- In theory, each post answers the question, “What are you doing?”
- Updates appear immediately
- Users can “follow” one another’s updates and send messages privately
- The platform works via the web, via SMS (cell phone), IM clients and several applications on Mac and Windows
- Each post is a “tweet”

The only way to really understand Twitter is to experience it — get an account, find some friends and watch what other people are doing with it.

For journalists and news organizations, Twitter can be used to...

- “Live tweet” news events like speeches, debates, meetings (already popular)
- Promote the latest news story or posting from your main web site or your blog(s)
- Interact with readers / listeners / viewers in real time
- Take questions or comments as part of live, on-the-air programs
- Use it as a newsroom (or multi-newsroom) instant messaging system that extends from PCs to cell phones and can be both private and public at the same time (“direct” messages are private, other messages are public)

Web Sites

- **twitter.com** — the core of the system
- **tweetscan.com** — search for words used in recent Tweets
- **en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter** — Wikipedia entry on Twitter
- **twitterlocal.net** — search for people Twittering in a specific area
- **tweetclouds.com** — get a visual representation of most-frequently-used words used by a particular Twitter user
- **twittervision.com** — watch Tweets appear in real-time from around the world
- **twirl.org** — a cross-platform local Twitter client (very popular)
- **twitstat.com** — real-time Twitter usage statistics

Guidelines for Web Extras

- Try everything at least a few times before you dismiss it. Sometimes it takes a while to get a hang of a new platform or service or figure out how your audience will react to it.
- Try things personally before committing to it professionally.
- While you might want to have a central coordinator of web stuff / new media, everyone needs to participate at some level.
- Keep your web extras organic, down to earth, human scale; don't use too much "polish" in producing your work.
- Just dive in. Don't wait to fully understand these things. Educate yourself in public along the way. Share what you learn with your audience. Don't be afraid to screw up.
- Be sure to keep local copies of all your content. Web services companies change hands rapidly and your data could be deleted in a merger or shutdown of a key service.
- Keep tabs on what others are doing and learn as you go.
- Have fun!

Questions?

I'd be happy to answer questions about things covered in this document or even services I didn't mention here (most notably social networking services like Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and so on). I don't promise to have all the answers, but I can certainly share what I know.

You can e-mail me at **john@gravitymedium.com**

Or catch me on Twitter — **twitter.com/jmproffitt**