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## Information and Data Visualization: Exclusive Interview with Visualization Master Juan Velasco (Postprint)

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**Date:** 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

### Abstract

Interviewee: Juan Velasco, Spanish information graphics design master and former graphics director at National Geographic. Velasco has received numerous awards from the Society for News Design (SND) and Malofej (including the 2013 Malofej Best of Show award), as well as honors from the Society of Publication Design and the American Institute of Graphic Arts. During his tenure at The New York Times, he was part of a team that received a Pulitzer Prize nomination.

### Full Text

#### Exclusive Interview with Visual Master Juan Velasco: Information and Data Visualization

**Interviewee:** Juan Velasco, Spanish information graphics design master and former graphics director at *National Geographic*. Velasco has received numerous awards from the Society for News Design (SND) and Malofej (including the 2013 Malofej Best of Show award), as well as honors from the Society of Publication Design and the American Institute of Graphic Arts. During his tenure at *The New York Times*, he was part of a team that received a Pulitzer Prize nomination.

**Interviewer:** Wu Ying

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**Wu Ying:** The entire process you described sounds like investigative work.

**Juan Velasco:** Yes, it is a form of investigation—journalistic investigation.

**Wu Ying:** Traditionally, we have many designers who merely play supporting roles. Do you think we should establish newsrooms led by visual experts in the future? What's your view?

**Juan Velasco:** I believe a successful newsroom should have strong visual leadership. In daily editorial meetings, the visual design department should be able to determine which visual content can better express the story, potentially replacing text or photo publication. At *The New York Times*, for instance, the head of the graphics department is also one of the executive editors of the entire newspaper. They are powerful enough to decide which information can be directly visualized rather than learning about it from text journalists first and then converting it into information graphics. This is necessary because while some text journalists excel at writing, research, and reporting, they lack visual thinking—they don't know which information is more suitable for visual presentation on various platforms.

**Wu Ying:** You know that media convergence is currently an industry-wide trend. We hope our staff can be multi-skilled and handle multiple tasks. For example, a designer could do news reporting, and a reporter could complete design work. What do you think?

**Juan Velasco:** I believe individuals should have cross-boundary capabilities. People can conduct research, design, create interactive visual programming, and understand where to find data resources and where the best information data for visualization can be found. So it's a mix of all skills. However, it's typically impossible to find one person who can do all these things well. That's why forming an information graphics team—comprising developers, animators, data miners, researchers, editors, and writers—is so important. Even a small team with diverse visual storytelling capabilities is crucial.

**Wu Ying:** Do you think data visualization is the same as information graphics design?

**Juan Velasco:** Some people confuse these two concepts. They are actually very similar and sometimes overlap. I believe data visualization often involves online data visualization, using visual means to reveal the value of data—for example, interactive visual works where readers can find the data most interesting to them. Information graphics design, on the other hand, is more common in print and digital editions, containing more illustration and hand-drawn expression methods. Information graphics designers often use a creative approach to visualize a complete story from beginning to end, while data visualization professionals focus more on interpreting data. We identify data that interests readers and then let them immerse themselves in it.

**Wu Ying:** So which direction do you think your work leans toward? Are you doing data visualization or information graphics design?

**Juan Velasco:** I think I do both. Currently, I create more digital works, where I also need to find data and design interactions. Throughout my career,

I've done more print-based information graphics design, but I also love current data information design. Both approaches are interesting—whether it's the traditional method where a designer tells a story from start to finish using one technique, or the contemporary approach of using various digital forms to interpret data.

**Wu Ying:** What do you think is the most important skill for an information graphics designer?

**Juan Velasco:** I believe the most important skill is discovering information, having journalistic thinking, and presenting information in a very clear way. The goal is to reveal the value of information, not to decorate or try to explain information to readers. This is not about aesthetic design ability; it's about the ability to tell stories with powerful visual language in a clear and understandable way. Never attempt to create something you haven't fully understood yourself.

**Wu Ying:** As you know, China has 730 million internet users, 95% of whom are mobile users. So in China, we are mobile-first. What are your thoughts on the presentation of information graphics design on mobile devices?

**Juan Velasco:** Yes, this is a reality. When I worked at *National Geographic*, we often struggled with telling good stories on small screens like smartphones. We were accustomed to print media, but with smartphones—such small devices where you can swipe through all information with your finger—some complex interactive works that read well on desktop computers and tablets don't provide a good experience on smartphones. The information design department hasn't spent much time focusing on smartphones. However, some content performs well on small screens, such as videos and GIFs, where readers just want to click, play, listen, or understand stories through animation. I believe that for information interaction design on small screens, you should pursue simplicity and clarity without too many navigation functions. Perhaps simple, multi-page responsive designs that scroll from top to bottom can better adapt to various terminals.

**Wu Ying:** I know you've done many print media works, but in this digital age, how do you update your digital skills?

**Juan Velasco:** I constantly update my skills. I've always loved print creation, design, and drawing, but now I must become familiar with creating digital works, which means I have to continuously update my skills. The world is constantly changing technologically, and people don't know what to learn to keep their skills aligned with societal needs. I often suggest learning programming, such as HTML, CSS, JavaScript, and D3. If interested, you can also learn animation production—Adobe After Effects can quickly create post-production effects. At the same time, you need to understand how people currently access information and data, so you can continuously optimize your experience design across various terminals.

**Wu Ying:** I know you have a very successful career in information graphics

design. You worked at *The New York Times* for six years and then served as graphics director at *National Geographic* for nine years. What advice do you have for young people regarding career development?

**Juan Velasco:** I believe that when entering this field, the most important thing is to be inspired by great works. This means finding your role models or people you want to follow, truly loving their work, and slowly imitating them. I mean trying to understand how they view information, organize information, handle information balance, and other such methods. Then you can try to do the same, and gradually, you'll become more mature and realize you want to learn even more. Following your role models and keeping pace with their development is a very interesting process. You must also understand that information design work is half design work and half journalism work. You must have high-quality journalistic literacy to discover news interest points, data sources, and research information. So remember, when creating information graphics, you're not just a designer—you're a news reporter.

**Wu Ying:** Can I ask who your role models are?

**Juan Velasco:** I've had several role models throughout my career. For example, when I first started working at *The New York Times*, Charles Brown, our department head, greatly influenced me. He taught me how to conduct research and reporting, which improved my work significantly. This also made me an excellent information graphics reporter later on. His minimalist and clear visual language presentation methods also influenced me greatly. Later, pioneers like John Grimwade and Nigel Holmes, with their clean styles, also influenced me considerably. Throughout my career, I've followed many people, and to this day, I regularly follow the world's best information graphics design works to see how others use visual language to tell good stories, drawing inspiration from different cultures.

**Wu Ying:** It seems many people have influenced you. I believe no one's success can be achieved without help from others.

**Juan Velasco:** Of course. You must seek inspiration, find opportunities and resources, and improve yourself. Then better opportunities and resources will quickly find you.

**Wu Ying:** My last question: When will you come to China to hold workshops?

**Juan Velasco:** I'd be delighted. I've been to China four times and have produced excellent works each time. I really enjoy working here, and the Chinese people are very friendly. I hope to conduct workshops here soon.

**Wu Ying:** That's wonderful. I'm very pleased to have you here today, and I hope your workshops can be launched in China soon.

**Juan Velasco:** I hope so too. Thank you.

**[Interview Notes]:** On Media Convergence Talent Cultivation in China’s Deep Media Integration Development

I’ve known Juan for a long time. The first time was seven years ago at the SND conference in Denver, Colorado, where the organizing committee arranged for him to announce the global annual best information graphics design awards. Later, in 2015, I invited him as a judge for a college student news design competition at the Missouri School of Journalism. Then came his recent trip to Beijing.

Juan is a particularly gifted information graphics designer. He moved to the United States at age 26, after working for five years at Spain’s second-largest daily newspaper, *El Mundo*. He followed his brother who had also moved to the U.S. When I asked if he had imagined such a successful career before leaving Spain, he said he never had. He considered himself fortunate—he sent his portfolio to the head of the graphics department at *The New York Times*, was quickly hired, and worked there for five years. He participated in information graphics reporting on major news events like U.S. presidential elections and 9/11. Later, he became graphics director at *National Geographic* for nine years. During his tenure there, he visited China four times: to Beijing to illustrate the “Forbidden City,” to Xi’an for the “Terracotta Warriors Color Restoration” project, and to Guizhou for the “China’s Super Caves” project. He said he was always happy and excited to come because China’s history is a world treasure with so much valuable historical information worth exploring.

During his two-day visit to China, Juan first gave a lecture at People’s Daily Media Technology Co., then held a salon event with me at Communication University of China. Throughout the lectures and activities, we discussed many issues regarding information and data visualization, particularly reflections on data visualization and talent cultivation under China’s current media convergence development situation. Juan graduated from the Complutense University of Madrid with a major in journalism. He has always considered himself a journalist rather than a designer—or what he calls a “graphic reporter.” He emphasized this point repeatedly, which made me reflect on talent cultivation in China’s journalism industry.

In the United States, many news designers study journalism. During their four years in university, they learn news reporting, writing skills, and communication theory, then choose a specialized skill they’re interested in. For example, when I taught at the Missouri School of Journalism for three years, my students could do their own reporting and editing, then design layouts, proofread, and simultaneously handle web publishing and social media distribution. The American journalism education model first helps students understand the industry, then teaches them a specialized skill. After graduation, when working in news media, everyone shares common journalistic literacy and can make corresponding value judgments and editorial decisions about news. They simply collaborate using their different strengths, making the team fast and efficient. From a human resources perspective, they are integrated from the start—truly “you in me, me

in you.”

Looking at China’s journalism industry development, our news visual talents have always been recruited directly from fine arts majors. While they have excellent visual skills, they know very little about the news industry. Designers rarely take the initiative to learn journalism knowledge and skills, and text editors never expect designers to do so. Moreover, text editors don’t require themselves to develop visual thinking and hands-on abilities. As a result, although such teams have specialized expertise, they lack multi-skilled individuals and cross-boundary talents, leading to low media innovation probability. Therefore, in the current deep media convergence development situation, to achieve “you in me, me in you,” we must first solve the integration of people. Everyone should possess media convergence literacy—that is, staff in all positions of the news media industry should increase their reserves of industry general knowledge and update their media technology skills, while intensifying the cultivation of all-media talents to improve media innovation probability. This is the fundamental solution to the problem.

Juan also introduced us to his work situation at *National Geographic* in the United States. He said the information graphics department follows projects. When a project arrives, they immediately assemble a team; once completed, the team disbands. Therefore, boundaries between departments are relatively blurred—everyone comes for the project. This working method increases work enthusiasm and allows people to better showcase their abilities and choose their interests.

He also mentioned that from the perspective of traditional news production models, visual personnel play a service role in news content production: text editors tell designers what they should do, rather than designers with journalistic thinking proposing from a visual perspective what they want to do. Nowadays, in many mainstream American media outlets, the role of visual leadership in the newsroom cannot be ignored. Often, when visual leaders face a pile of news materials in editorial meetings, they have the authority to decide which content can be directly visualized instead of using text. Just this April, when I was in Washington for a conference, *The Washington Post’s* executive editor, García Ruiz, proposed creating some design-driven news products in the future. This approach of elevating news visual leadership is something we can try in deep media integration development. After all, visuals are part of content, and when discussing content innovation, it often involves the application of visual and technological innovation. Therefore, improving visual leadership in the newsroom, blurring departmental boundaries, focusing on projects, and aiming to produce quality work—this is the kind of innovation that holds promise for media convergence development.

Finally, Juan emphasized the importance of professional training. Media technology updates rapidly, and as media practitioners, we must keep up with the demands of the era by constantly updating our knowledge and skills to avoid being eliminated by the market. I believe media practitioners’ professional training

must be people-oriented. Only by addressing people's needs in career development can we solve the industry's needs in development and transformation. When traditional media positions are continuously replaced by new media positions, what these traditional content creators most urgently need is technological upgrading. From the perspective of the entire industry's development and transformation—from print to new media—the improvement and updating of media practitioners' digital skills is the most pressing issue to address. Because digital skills, or media technology updates, are key to media innovation and producing quality work. Therefore, our professional training should focus on media convergence technology training.

Juan's two-day visit to China ended quickly. That day at Communication University of China, nearly a hundred people attended the event—media practitioners, teachers, and students. The discussion in the second half was very active. This made me feel that everyone has great interest and desire for new thinking on media convergence development, as it relates not only to media professionals' own development but also to the future of media convergence itself.

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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