

# Matt Richtel

In late 2015, *Exhibition* editor Ellen Snyder-Grenier interviewed *New York Times* reporter Matt Richtel to learn how his work on the human attention span in the digital age might inform how we write labels.

***For those who may not be familiar with your work, how would you summarize your findings about the impact of computers on how we think and behave?***

Interactive electronic devices have qualities that are so seductive that they border on the addictive. This is because our phones and computers play to primitive social wiring and they reward us with bursts of the same kinds of neurochemicals that reward sex and consumption of food. Drugs too. This does not make technology bad. Not by any stretch. But the recognition of the power of our devices should awaken us that they have profound side effects. Put another way: our devices, rather than empowering us, can sometimes enslave us and turn us into the robots, not them. We become the automated entity, lost in a cycle of call and response.

***Has what you learned affected your own writing? If so, in what way, and what might we learn from your experience?***

There are many answers to

this question. I'll pick one.

It has taught me that I, as a writer, am in a pitched battle for attention. Therefore, my stories and storytelling must rise to another level. That's the bad news, the challenge. The good news is that I think that great storytelling can succeed in capturing attention like almost nothing else. A great, emotionally resonant story (true or fiction) beats fast-twitch tweets any day of the week. I'm not saying I can pull that off. Maybe on a really good day. But I am heartened that stories still hold such a powerful place.

***In this digital age, how should computers' impact on how we think and behave inform the way we write labels in exhibitions—shorter labels? Less labels? Something else? Please be as specific as possible.***

Two words: emotional resonance. I'm not sure how you do that with labels. It's beyond my pay grade.

But I mentioned "emotional resonance" in the answer above and I'll repeat it here.

Things that are true, that

we believe and feel, tend to get our attention. It's hard to compete for attention if your value proposition, as it were, is something off tune, poorly calibrated, cheap. That doesn't argue, necessarily, for short or long or any other particular strategy like that (although, I suppose, in general the adage holds: less is more). The main thing is that ideas must feel true, be visceral and, better yet, surprising, new, and true.

***Last, a general question about museum exhibitions: if we assume shorter attention spans and endless stimuli to be a given in today's world, how might we constructively respond in the ways we create exhibitions in general? For example, should we include less technology? More? Something else?***

Once, I had a conversation that surprised me with Arthur Sulzberger Jr., the publisher of the *New York Times*.

We were walking back from a lunch at which some of our articles had been given an award. This was 2009, I think,



**Matt Richtel**

is a bestselling author and reporter for the *New York Times* based in San Francisco. In 2010, he won the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting for his series on distracted driving. His nonfiction thriller, *A Deadly Wandering*, explored these issues and was a *New York Times* bestseller. It was also named a best book of 2014 by The *San Francisco Chronicle* and other publications. Matt is the author of four mysteries, including *The Doomsday Equation*.

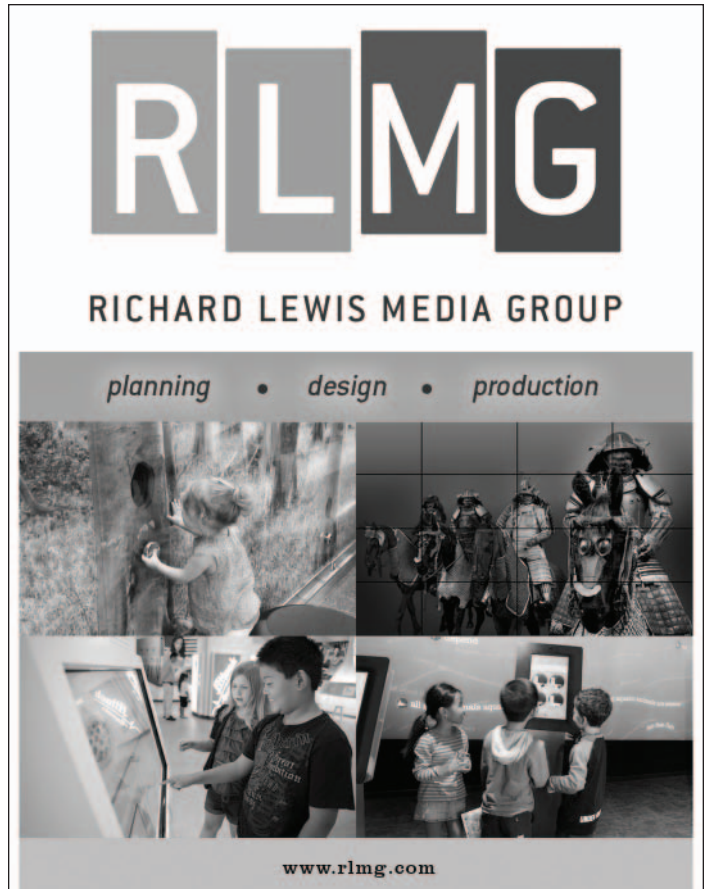
and I was marveling at the amount of traffic our website, NYTimes.com, was getting. I said something to the effect: who'd have thought but we're a mass-marketing publication.

And Arthur said: wrong. He explained to me that we shouldn't ever forget that we are a kind of luxury brand. We have a certain audience that will be our core. We will get others to pay attention, for sure, and we do. But our *core* audience will be much narrower and will come back again and again for the things we pride ourselves on and do well. It was eye opening for me and I've since taken to heart a clichéd version of that: you can't please all the people. Also, I realized I'd bought into a fallacy that the Internet, because it allows us to reach everyone, should make everyone a potential audience member. Some people will never and were never going to appreciate the product, for better or worse.

That said, we at the *Times* have done well more than a yeoman's job of staying up with the technological times. Our graphics, video, interactive features, etc., are really second to none. In other words, we have stayed true to the core journalistic principles, recognizing we can't please everyone, while also understanding how people consume information.

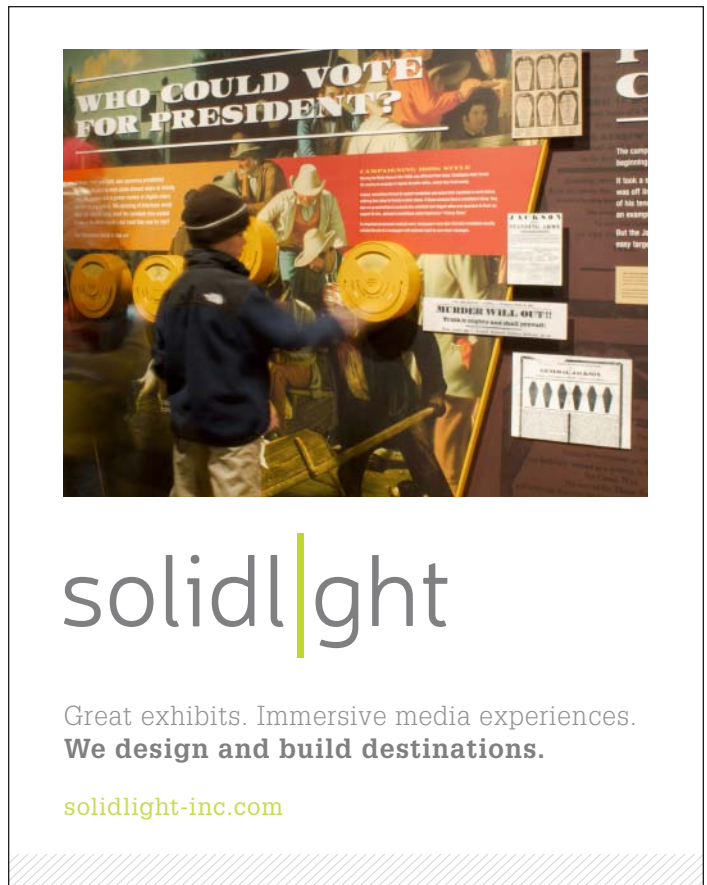
What does this argue for in the way of museums? I suppose, taking liberties well beyond my knowledge of museums, it argues foremost for being who you are—historians, artists, curators. By definition, you are recording, restoring, commenting on the times. Then it argues for experimentation that doesn't betray who you are. Try new things, play with media, presentation, format. But never lose sight of the fact that your purpose should be unchanged, without apology. When your purpose changes, you've gone too far.

***And just for fun: do you have a favorite museum, and if so, what makes it your favorite?*** I really enjoyed the Imperial War Museum in London. It had all kinds of cool features and different presentations throughout. I loved looking at the reconstruction of Winston Churchill's underground bunker. It just took me away in time. Besides, it was there I discovered my favorite poster. It was an invention of Churchill, I think. It reads: "To dress extravagantly in war time is worse than bad form, it is unpatriotic." I keep it posted outside a closet in our bedroom and when my wife says I'm poorly dressed (I'm a writer!) I point at the poster. ■



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The image shows a collage of four black and white photographs: a child touching a wall, a group of people in historical costumes on horseback, a woman looking at a screen, and a group of children looking at a screen. Below the collage is the website address [www.rlmg.com](http://www.rlmg.com).



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The image shows a museum exhibit titled "WHO COULD VOTE FOR PRESIDENT?" featuring a man in a blue jacket and hat interacting with a large yellow wheel. Other exhibit elements include informational panels and a display of shoes.