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The new media approach to Higher Education: A presentation for the annual summer

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In the last 12 months alone, the newspaper industry went from worse to – as college students would say nowadays – "worser."

The Tribune Company, owner of the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times and many other top-selling newspapers in the country, filed for bankruptcy in December of 2008. McClatchy, the family company seen just a couple years ago as the role model for media conglomerates after it acquire a sleuth of newspapers including The Miami Herald, had 2 billion dollars in debt by May of 2009 (Smillie, 2009). The Christian Science Monitor announced recently that they would move from print to online-only, all in an effort to save money – and jobs.

And yet, students continue to enroll in journalism programs around the country in growing numbers. Many journalism schools are reporting higher numbers of applicants than in the last year, including Columbia University (38% more); University of Maryland (25% more); Stanford (20%) and University of North Carolina (14%), among others (Streib, 2009).

At the same time, newsrooms have been cutting down in staff. According to the Pew Research Center, more than 10,000 journalists (or 17.5% of the whole workforce) have lost their jobs since 2001, with 5000 of those firings happening last year alone (Pew Center, 2009).

Students are aware and wary of that fact. So are professors. And so are professionals.

One way the media has fought back to this reality of recession, as widely discussed within the media themselves, has been to change the description of what a journalist does. Journalists are now supposed to multitask, to perform multiple duties

rather than the one task in which they have been used to specializing, using the latest technology available. No more "pen and paper only." Rather, pen, paper, digital camera, voice recorder, computer and a wireless Internet connection.

Journalist professors, in the meantime, have understood that, and have tried to prepare their students for this change, giving them the tools to perform the new tasks required by the market.

Of course, this change comes with the usual criticisms – highlighted by this conference - of whether the focus on the marketplace helps or hurts students' academic experience.

As this paper will show, this focus of journalism education has been done not in detriment of the overall learning experience a college education should provide, but in addition. By properly tailoring its program, an educational institution can provide its students with both the skills set and the background to become wholesome professionals who will not only perform their duties but also perform them well while understanding what's behind it. And have a job.

A (brief) History of journalism education

As Weaver and Gray (1980) describe, journalism could be seen as an apprenticeship until the 1870s. It was then that the first programs of journalism in universities and colleges around the U.S. started to appear in institutions such as Washington College (now called Washington and Lee), in 1869; Kansas State College, in 1873; University of Missouri, in 1878 and University of Pennsylvania, in 1893 (Johansen, Weaver & Dornan, 2001). These initial programs, however, were managed by

English and philology departments, and focused on writing, editing and printing only, and not on any theory or ethical discussions whatsoever.

It'd take another several years until the University of Missouri founded the first school of journalism in the country, in 1908 (Weaver and Gray, 1980). Walter Williams, its first dean, started the division with the help if the State of Missouri, and the belief that journalists should be taught and prepared at a university (Missouri School of Journalism, 2009). The events were described in details in Winfield's "Journalism 1908: Birth of a Profession" (2008).

The boom of journalism education in the country happened between the 1920s and 1940s when, based on the success and template laid out by Missouri and Columbia University, other independent programs started to appear. In 1927, the University of Wisconsin decided to move journalism to its social sciences than humanities – the norm until then – changing forever the approach of journalism research and teaching (Johansen, Weaver & Dornan, 2001).   While in 1910 there were less than a dozen journalism professors in American colleges, by 1930, there were 690 (Vance, 1930).

In 1944, the University of Minnesota founded the first research division in journalism in the country (Johansen, Weaver & Dornan, 2001), marking another milestone in the development of journalism in academia.

Another proliferation of journalism schools happened once again in the 1960s, after the civil rights movements that swept the country opened the doors of universities to even more students (Jeter, 2002).

Between then and now, two more innovations would shake the world of journalism and, consequently, the way universities would teach it: the rise of TV

journalism, in the 1950s, and, much later, the adoption of the Internet as a news medium in the mid-1990s.

Still, the core principles remained: to teach journalists how to proficiently become good professionals. The question remained, however, as to how to accomplish that, as will be discussed below.

The (continuous) debate of teaching journalism in universities

Almost since its inception, the teaching of journalism in American universities has been surrounded by debate and controversies (as it should be, many would argue). Back in 1939, Pollard wrote that, when it comes to courses in journalism offered by American colleges and universities, "periodically their validity and justification continue to be questioned. These waves of criticism seem to recur in something like epidemic form" (pp. 356). This maxim remains true today.

Since then, the debate has been around three major points of contention: whether new professionals should act as watchdogs or play a social-democratic role in society; the balance between theory and practice in the teaching of journalism; and, more recently, the multimedia/multitasking aspect of journalism professionals with the advent of the Internet and the current economic recession.

The first debate relates to the importance of journalism to democracy, and its role as the "Fourth Power" in the country, as described by Megwa (2001). Barratt (1986) explained that democracy can only be fully achieved if all relevant information and sides are offered. If a newspaper, for example, chooses not to offer a certain view on a specific issue because of the lack of space, or assuming a lack of interest, people will not be able to define properly their own views or determine which issues are of their own interest.

Supported by studies from Bachrach and Baratz (1962), Cobb and Elder (1972), Cobb, Ross and Ross (1976), Sinclair (1982), Kingdon (1984), and Livingston (1992) explained that the political importance of agenda setting – highlighting one issue over another – is nothing new, having been recognized and studied by several scholars from different fields.

Once more, students in journalism school have to leave with the notion that, rather than simple portrayers of events, they have a responsibility as agents of democracy.

In that sense, the concept of new media and multimedia can easily help. With the cheapening of equipment over time, students are not relegated to having just a few typewriters, or maybe even one single computer per class, or per school. In lab classes, students now have one computer each on which to work. They also have easier access to digital cameras, digital voice recorders, and memory card readers for less than 20 dollars.

They also have access more news outlets, namely, to web space, either paid by the student for a small fee (some companies are charging around 5 dollars a month nowadays for that) or provided for free by their educational institution. Free web space, by hthe way, is a must in any department in which students may take advantage of that for self-promotion and self-publication. Students, then, are able to publish their own stories, not relying on a media organization anymore. As the more sources of information available, the more democratic the process is.

The second and most probably the longest and most fought debate which goes along perfectly with the topic of this conference has been whether journalism should stop being a professional course, as defended by Carson (1930).

On one hand, Carson understood the importance of learning techniques to properly interview policemen, policemen, and local plutocrats; to learn the proper names of office appliances and mechanical devices; to learn how to write a headline or smart catch phrases.

On the other however, Carson (1930) stated that it was important to give journalism students a wholesome education, including – as Vance (1930) very well described – a "broad, cultural nature like other courses in the curriculum, with the professional aim little more prominent than in a course in English poetry or any other course in a liberal arts college" (pp. 743). For Vance, journalism programs in higher education should focus less on the technical and practical aspects.

Carson and Vance wrote their articles in 1930, as a sort of roadmap for upcoming journalism programs around the country. They could foresee that this field of education would grow: in 2002, Becker et al. listed 463 four-year journalism schools in the U.S., educating 182,218 undergraduate and 12,382 graduate students in the U.S. on journalism and mass communication, and awarding more than 40,000 bachelor's and 4,000 graduate degrees each year (Becker et al., 2002).

Of course, aside from numbers, much has changed since the 1930s in journalism within higher education in the U.S. Schools have changed their curriculum, following, in many aspects, the preaching above. Courses migrated from a plainly professional focus to a more wholesome one, including classes on journalism ethics, history, theory, diversity, literature, to name a few.

Nonetheless, the debate hasn't rested. As new technologies come around, and, with them, the need for professors to instruct students on how to use that technology, new debate arises on whether journalism schools are providing a balanced curriculum.

Talking about the teaching of journalism history in higher education, King (2008) summarized the discussion in one paragraph:

"So apart from the skill set associated with journalism, does a body of knowledge equivalent to say organic chemistry in medicine or economics and accounting in business exist for journalism—some content or information about journalism, its history, development and social role—that all journalists, or perhaps even all people interested in, or influenced by, journalism, should know to be considered educated about the field?" (pp. 167).

In 1993, Lewis wrote a now famous essay entitled "J-school ate my brain," attacking the graduate program at the Columbia Journalism School – regarded as one of the top in the country since its creation – and the professors' focus on style and grammar, rather than substance. The essay heralded a response from Joan Konner, Dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, to the Editor of the publication, contesting some of the facts listed by Lewis and defending the school in others (Lewis, 1993).

The new wave of debate has started in 1995, when the media started actively using the Internet. With the new technology and new approach to being a journalist, a number of scholars have argued that schools are once more focusing on providing students with skills, but no substance (Mangan, 2007; Edge, 2004; Bugeja, 2005; Powell, 2009; Eronini et al., 2001; Henry, 1999; Phipps, 2000).

Still, with the right approach, the two concepts – theory and practice – do not have to be mutually exclusive – on the contrary, actually. By giving students a clear vision of the practical use of theory, students are much more inclined not only to pay attention to the material being taught, but also to process the information more carefully (thus, remembering more of it).

As will be explained in more details below, classes such a new media journalism one may allow students to properly learn the concepts and theories behind an assignment, and put it to practice, thus learning the importance and application of theory and practice alike.

There is no reason why students have to choose between theory and practice. They should, based on a reasonable number of credits and a well-crafted curriculum, backed by interested and knowledgeable faculty members, receive both. While it is one course focusing solely on the "body of content" described above by King, or a class as the one I propose that mixes both theory and practice, journalism students should receive a balanced education that indeed fulfills the requests of the critics of the field.

On the topic of the influence of the Internet and new media in journalism, the third debate has been the requirement of news organizations that new journalism professionals be skilled in not one, but many aspects of journalism: write, edit, take photos, create photo galleries, write cutlines, shoot video, edit those videos, upload them to the publication's web site, among other duties.

Media organizations, then, replace three staff members for one that can do all three jobs, partially explaining the decrease in staff numbers shown previously in this study.

Journalism programs, then, adapt, adding new courses in multimedia journalism, or adding those skills to already existing classes. And, once more, while some praise new media for granting journalism programs a reason to demand more funding for new equipment (Phipps, 2000), there are those who criticize whether adding those skills detract from the "more wholesome education" of core values of the Internet (Phipps, 2000; Gup, 2008; Ledbetter, 1997; Kunkel, 2003).

As this paper will show, these two do not have to be mutually exclusive.

Journalism 440 – Writing for the Web

Addressing these questions – both from theorists and from the market – the Department of Journalism at California State University, Long Beach started for the past few years incorporating more new media into its curriculum. But the approach has been a wise one, with great outcomes.

Being a professor of journalism, it is always tricky when it comes to teaching senior classes. With such a practice-focused major and being so close to graduating, students are always looking into how what they learn will be applicable in their future jobs as reporters, copy editors, editors, managing editors and so on.

A great example of that was my "Writing for the Web" class, which I teach at California State University, Long Beach. In it, students (most of them seniors) were required to produce, in this order, an original, 1,200-word news piece, called a "main story"; a blog with continuously updated entries; an audio recording (audio podcast); a video recording (video podcast); and a flash, animated infographics using Adobe Flash. All projects have to focus on the same topic, covered in the main piece and further developed in the next projects.

Since most students came with little or no knowledge of the software being used (Adobe Dreamweaver, Adobe Flash and Soundslides, among other tools available online which have since been discontinued), part of the semester was spent teaching them how to use the proper equipment and the associated program. However, most of the semester was actually used to teach them how to properly approach subjects before using the software.

While it is quite hard to properly describe the work done in a new media class in a written paper – without the obvious aid of audio, video or animations – following is a short summary of four case studies of previous students in the class, and how they have used the class and its assignments in balanced yet goal-oriented manner.

Case study #1: Matthew Mesa

Matthew Mesa was a student who, since early in the semester, showed an interest in real estate issues. He stated that one of his goals after graduating would be to cover the real estate market for a newspaper or web site.

For his main story, Matthew interviewed real estate agents who worked with his mother, an agent herself. He researched older stories about the local market (thus, practicing research methods), analyzed the laws concerning real estate in California and the U.S., and performed extensive interviews, and ultimately wrote one of the best stories among all his classmates.

Based on that story, he then build a web site where he published it with hyperlinks. And went on to do an audio podcast, where he showed snippets of the interviews he had performed previously with real estate agents. Once more, he received one of the highest grades in the class.

Following those, Matthew went on to do a video podcast, using original footage he collected while driving around town. He then did a collage of this footage with some vidcaps (video captures from a computer), and added audio. His video podcast showed how different houses in the area has lost much of their value in the last few years, supporting his main hypothesis he had been building since he wrote his main story. Once more, his project was awarded an almost perfect grade.

He finished the semester by building a Flash animated infographics consisting of a bar chart, comparing house prices from a couple years ago and now – similar to his video podcast, but with a different approach. Matthew finished the semester with the highest grade in the class and, after graduating recently, he has started to actively seek employment in real estate agencies, using his projects from our class as one of his pitching tools for that.

Case study #2: Michael Plaza

Michael Plaza was the new online editor for the school newspaper when he enrolled in the class. While Michael had a lot of interest and will in developing his online journalism skills and, consequently, those of the newspaper, he did not have the necessary knowledge yet at that point, and did not know exactly what else was involved in online journalism other than simply "copying and pasting" stories from print.

Taking advantage of the timing – he took the class in the fall of 2008, the apex of the presidential election – Michael focused all his projects on that topic. But, taking advantage also of the fact he was the online editor for the school newspaper, he published all his work in the paper's web site.

More than that, since then, Michael has taught others involved in the school paper

to do the same, producing whole packages with their stories that could be used online. And now, as Michael is also graduating, he plans to find a job where we can do similar projects.

Case study #3: Kyle Shohara

Kyle Shohara has always been a fan of sports, especially ice hockey, and someone interested in sports journalism. Therefore, it was just normal that, when class started, we decided to focus all his work in the topic. Kyle did all his assignments focusing, then, on the Anaheim Ducks. With his love for the topic, all his assignments were done with great excitement, great devotion and the outcome, equally great.

Kyle has since managed to get an internship with a local hockey team, and will be doing many of the same assignments he did in class for the team.

Case study #4: Niki Payne

Finally, one last example to showcase the concepts used in Journalism 440 is Niki Payne.

When Niki arrived in class, she already maintained a blog focusing on dating and relationships, which she shared with her sorority sisters. However, that was all she did.

Throughout the semester, she managed to develop that same concept into an array of outlets, as requested by class: a full article; an audio podcast; a video podcast, and a flash animation consisting of a very professional-looking line chart.

Niki graduated in December of 2008 and, as every recent grad, worried about finding a job. Not even a month after graduating, however, Niki had secured not only one, but two jobs: one writing stories for a local paper and working on their web site, and another writing a column for a web-based publication on the topic of relationships.

In both jobs, she wrote back to tell, she convinced her bosses she was capable of doing her assignments based on what we learned in class. She has also been invited several times as a guest speaker or different events, based on the material she covers on her blog and online column.

Conclusion

More than ever, with the current state of the economy in the country and specially in the media industry, students worry about how the skills they learn while in school will help them ultimately get a job. It is, after all, a fair question. It becomes hard many times to convince students that the theory they're learning can most times be more important than how to use a specific software or technique.

As a professor of new media and graphic design, it actually works in my advantage to treat a university as a market-oriented institution. Students' interest becomes heightened when they can clearly see the application of the theory they've learned from previous classes into actual products they can easily show to future employers as a tool to market themselves.

Rather than detracting students from learning, such practical exercises and applications give professors a better venue to encourage learning. As students focus on the market, and ask questions on how better "sell themselves" to the market, they become more open to learning theories, and looking for previously published material – may it be scholar research or similar projects executed by others in which students can mirror they own.

By utilizing the approach described in this paper – one-on-one work with students, taking advantage of their own interests – the best of the two worlds is used in

balance: students receive a heavy load of theory, but also have a chance to put it in practice. All theory is based on established of the fields as discussed above: history, ethics, law, all those topics are raised with and discussed by students as they're preparing to performing the various assignments during the semester.

Furthermore, by working with students in class, one on one, or making themselves available for students as much as possible, with office hours or e-mail access, for example, professors can encourage student learning even more. Rather than being detrimental to their educational development, then, the so-called "consumer culture" can actually be extremely helpful for professors to stimulate student learning, then.

And, when students can see the end product so close – not only the class project itself, but its applications in getting a job in the near future – it has been my experience that students react extremely positively to the class, and are more open to it. They become more welcoming to the theory, the basics as they learn how it will be applied in the "real world."

In majors such as journalism that require a set of skills to not only enter but also survive in the market, this approach has, ultimately, a dual purpose and outcome: it improves students interest and retention in class, and also helps them eventually find jobs in a very tough, closed market.

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