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REFORMING J101:
Establishing an Online Presence

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Abstract

Establishing an online presence is essential for anyone hoping for a career in journalism today. Increasingly, journalists in all media are expected to write for websites, maintain their own blogs, and use social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter to promote their work, interact with readers, and find new sources. A key question for journalism educators, however, is when to start the process of establishing those online skills. This paper examines what can be done in an introductory journalism course at a liberal arts college, where journalism is not necessarily the career students have in mind. It suggests techniques for encouraging students, but not compelling them, to start using LinkedIn, Twitter, and blogs after completing the course. It examines student reactions to a series of classes offering tips and resources, held near the end of the first semester of introductory journalism. It concludes that this is a useful and professional way of launching students into professional online writing by allowing them to go at their own pace.

Introduction

Establishing an online presence is essential for anyone hoping for a career in journalism today. Increasingly, journalists in all media are expected to write for websites, maintain their own blogs, and use social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter to promote their work, interact with readers, and find new sources (Beeson, 2005; Carpenter, Lamb, & Ritzenthaler, 2010; Leon, 2010; Salles, 2010).

A key question for educators, however, is when to start the process of establishing those online skills. In liberal arts programs, where journalism is not necessarily the student's career goal, should students be forced online in their first, and perhaps only, journalism course? Doesn't this require a set of skills that ensure students don't fall on their virtual faces as they learn? The idea, after all, is to help students establish a credible, professional online presence, not something they'll later regret.

A presentation on using social media in the classroom at the August 2010 conference of the Association of Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication (Carpenter, Lamb,& Ritzenthaler, 2010) convinced this educator that it is possible, and perhaps essential, to start this process in the very first journalism course. All students need to learn professional online skills to establish (and avoid ruining) their reputations in the eyes of potential colleagues and employers. This is true, no matter what aspect of communication they hope to work at, and it's helpful in many other fields, as well.

By the time they get to university, most students have been warned of the hazards of online exposure. Some are quite nervous about trying new things on-

line,[1] while others are shy about exposing their writing to the world. They need coaching first. Serena Carpenter, who teaches at the University of Arizona's Cronkite School, has figured out good ways to do that and is generous about sharing them on her website and other online locations (Carpenter, 2010, 2011).

I decided to introduce some of Carpenter's resources and techniques in a week of lectures, class discussion, guest speakers, and exercises that I called "Establishing an Online Presence."

In deference to my students' lack of experience, I made two fundamental decisions that affected the outcome: I scheduled this topic late in the semester and I did not require them to do it as a graded assignment. This gave them the chance to develop basic skills before leaping into publishing their work online. And it gave them the option of holding back until they felt ready (if ever). However, by the end of the week, they knew for sure that it was something they should start doing as soon as possible, that it could be a lot of fun, and that it might even earn them some money – or perhaps free products like clothing! (And yes, we discussed the ethics of that.) I scheduled this topic right after the week that focused on legal hazards, such as libel and copyright protection, and following many writing assignments and a series of private blog entries that only I could read, focusing on the course readings. On all their writing, they got extensive feedback before the idea of going online was ever broached in class.

Method

The class met three times a week, for an hour at a time. So I divided the week's topic into three segments:

First, introduce the idea of establishing oneself online, along with some of Carpenter's (2011) suggestions. Introduce a range of Internet options, from LinkedIn to Twitter, that can provide a simple, limited entry point for students.

Second, invite some of the best student bloggers on campus to come and share their experiences with the class. Encourage them to explain the interactive aspects of the blog and what reactions they have received from readers.

Third, talk things over after the student bloggers have been to the class. In our case, we needed to discuss ethics and whether one should aim for paid or unpaid work.

In the first class, for example, students might want to consider changing their names. You heard me right: Carpenter (2010) suggested using a middle name or initial to distinguish oneself from other people of the same name, or perhaps even changing one's name to something completely different (this should be carefully thought out) with the purpose of sloughing off an online persona one does not want employers to link to oneself (though it might actually be oneself!) Certainly, the idea of using a pseudonym is not uncommon, and it's a good way to get started. But when one is looking to establish one's professional reputation, that could be a bad idea – after all, a journalist needs a byline, and that byline is usually his or her own name. This is considered a sign of professionalism among journalists (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001). I encouraged my students to consider online writing a form of self-publishing: a way to establish one's reputation as a writer, journalist, marketer, public relations expert – whatever one wants to become. Whether and how to make the leap to hyperspace is a dilemma every student faces, and I don't tell them how to resolve it. After all, not every student is interested in achieving professionalism. Only a few in my classes are aiming for journalism careers, while about twice as many are interested in marketing, public relations, or some other aspect of communication. So I feel my job is to introduce the various options and let them decide for themselves.

Also in the first class, I introduced the idea of blogging, not about one's day-to-day life, but about a topic upon which students are, or could readily become, something of an expert. There are many kinds of blogs, as Scott Rosenberg explains in his 2009 book, Say Everything, that chronicles the history of blogging. Some bloggers simply post links to interesting stuff, while others chronicle the minutiae of everyday life.

Still others focus on particular topics: the so-called "mommy bloggers," for example, who write about child rearing.

With a little thought, students can usually find something they know more about than most people they know: baton twirling or knitting, baseball history or video games. Whatever they pick as a topic is fine – it's simply the idea of narrowing the domain, finding out new things about it, and attracting readers with a similar interest.

The next step, in class two, is to introduce two student bloggers from past journalism classes who have achieved some success. For me, the first was J.P. Calubaquib, who follows BEDROC, a young hip-

hop band that seems to be on the rise, in a blog called "Sessions with J.P."

The second was Dale Armbruster, who writes for a sports site called Bleacher Report. It hosts many writers who compete for praise and attention from readers. They writers can win prizes for their efforts. Armbruster's work is at: http://bleacherreport.com/users/448481-dalearmbruster.

A third blogger, who writes under the name, "Veggie Girl," (this can be viewed by invitation only), couldn't make it to class the day the two student bloggers attended, but I did introduce my students to her blog. A fourth student, Sharonica Smedley, who writes a blog, "The Logic Behind the Nonsense," was at a conference when the two bloggers spoke.

For us, the class visit was an overwhelming success. The students clearly enjoyed what Calubaquib and Armbruster had to say and were truly impressed by what the two student writers had achieved. They saw what the bloggers were doing was fun, but also admirable. Admittedly, Calubaquib and Armbruster are writing on topics students generally enjoy: music and sports. Students asked many questions and, when the class finished, several students lined up to ask more questions of the two visitors.

One thing we learned is that bloggers don't usually earn money from blogging – at least, not at the level where these two students are – but blogs can earn bloggers prizes and products. Calubaquib said he receives all his clothes from a local store – he is, in effect, a model for their clothing. The deal is, he said, his agreement with the store says he can't wear clothing from any other store. Armbruster can win prizes if his postings are well-read and rated highly by readers.

Some of my colleagues – but interestingly, none of my students – raised ethical alarms about the free clothing. In our third class, this issue became part of the discussion. I asked my students if they thought it was an ethical problem for a blogger to accept free products, and most said no. Bloggers don't get paid money, so they deserve to get something, those students said. If products are it, then, good for them. I suggested that there might be a conflict of interest if, for example, a blogger wrote about the clothing he was getting for free without disclosing that fact. We looked at the Society of Professional Journalists' (SPJ) Code of Ethics and found this:

> Journalists should:
>
> Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
>
> Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
>
> Disclose unavoidable conflicts. (Society of Professional Journalists, 1999)

The free products issue was raised in another forum I attended on blogging, a training workshop for citizen journalists put on in May 2008 by SPJ in Chicago (Society of Professional Journalists, 2008). A group of women, who called themselves "mommy bloggers" because they wrote about their experiences with their children, asked what was the ethical thing to do about the large number of unsolicited products – usually toys – they received in the mail. Did they have to send them back? Media lawyer Meg Tebo, who's also an adjunct professor at Columbia College and was one of the instructors at the Citizen Journalism Academy, suggested several options. All involved stating a policy on the blogger's home page. It might say that all products would be returned, or that none would be discussed in the column, or that all products would be rated honestly and without bias – whatever the blogger decided to do. Tebo said it was perfectly ethical to use the blog to praise or criticize products, but any relationship to the company should be explicit. "If you're not objective on a subject, it needs to be clear, up front," Tebo advised.

I explained all this to my journalism class and the students seemed to find it a revelation. I think the lesson hit home (or in some cases, didn't hit home) because they had seen it happening with student colleagues – not some faraway professionals at a media outlet downtown. It is hard to imagine a better ethics lesson than this session provided.

Results

The results, in this case, cannot really come from me – they rest with my students. How many of them will start blogging? Will they start out with microblogging – that is, Twitter – or posting a resumé on LinkedIn? It's hard to say so soon afterward, but I did try a quick survey by e-mail. It was summer and many ignored e-mail, but I did get three replies.

One student said he thought the blogs the students did for me alone should be open to the world, primarily because the feedback one gets from readers is such an important component of blogging. He hasn't done any blogging since the class ended; however, he has done some microblogging:

> I have created a Twitter (account) and so far, I do find it to be useful with keeping up with news. I haven't followed many friends yet because I don't know many people who are legitimate Tweeters. I do plan to use it along with my Facebook; I hear you can merge the two.

Another student said he thought the private blogs they did for me on class readings were not helpful at all, but if they were going to be opened to other readers, they should only be open to the class. As for starting his own online writing, he has opened two new accounts:

> I have since gotten a Tumblr and Twitter account, but not necessarily for the purpose of getting myself out there. Twitter is an interesting tool that I really have not explored very much. I think I've posted about four Tweets, but the cool thing about Twitter is the ability to follow people like public officials or celebrities for up-to-the-minute news, or even just to get a feeling of who they are as a person. Tumblr, a blog, is something that I also have not done much with. I used it briefly as a very personal thing, much like a daily journal. I don't think anybody has ever seen my Tumblr, and I intend to keep it that way. I figure if a total stranger stumbles upon it, thats OK, but I didn't start it to gather a lot of attention or anything.

The third student who responded said she did not think the private blogs the students did for me were helpful either, but she agreed with the second student on how to approach opening up the blogs to other readers:

> If the blogs were open, they should be just for classmates. That way, the other students could study their peers' writing skills in order to improve their own. If the blogs were for the world at large, it would be an invasion of privacy and possibly a danger to those involved.

She said she hadn't started any online ventures since our classes on how to do this because she thought she already was spending too much time online:

> have not tried any of the suggestions that you gave us afterwards. I am not against Twitter; however, I am already addicted to Facebook, and I figured one website was enough, haha. I used to use LiveJournal to blog when I was younger, but now I find that it takes way too much time.

However, this last student is a sophomore. I can totally sympathize with her comments but expect that as she gets closer to graduation, she will see a compelling reason for establishing herself and her identity online. Perhaps by then she'll be able to take advantage of a course in online journalism!

Conclusions

This experiment proved to me that starting students off with some tips and resources for establishing an online presence is helpful, even in their very first journalism course. I am pleased with the results of my first attempt at doing this and plan to continue it in future introductory classes. In years to come, I hope to reap the rewards of seeing my students blogging and tweeting with the best of them!

I am still uncertain, however, about what to do with the blogs I currently require of all my intro journalism students, for my eyes only. I tend to agree with the third student whose comments I included in the "Results" section, that requiring open blogs in one's very first semester of journalism might actually be "an invasion of privacy" if a student feels unprepared. I am still of the opinion that students should not be asked to expose their writing to the world until they feel ready. They also need some training, both in journalistic writing and in avoiding the possible hazards, personal and legal, of expressing their opinions online. So I will keep my course segment on "Establishing an Online Presence" near the end of the semester and will encourage, but not compel, student action.

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Note:

1. That is, apart from Facebook.