Teaching Journalism & Mass Communication | A journal published by the AEJMC Small Programs Interest Group

Vol. 3 #1 (2013), pp. i–iii https://community.aejmc.org/smallprogramsinterestgroup/publications/journals

EDITOR'S NOTE

Adapting to 'Post-Industrial' Journalism

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Like many tasks these days, the writing of this Editor's Note got sidetracked due to some of the time I spent poking around the Internet, especially following projects like the continually surprising data visualizations on the London riots at the *Guardian's* data hub or taking Google Fusion Tables tutorials. I spend way too much time just playing oldies on Youtube, too, but for purposes of this Editor's Note I just want to point to the more purposeful procrastination I do.

When I am playing with data sets and admiring various data visualizations, I am usually thinking about what small data project I might try in one of my more advanced reporting classes. Such a project was on my list of possibilities last semester, but we ran out of time as some of our more traditional reporting projects on the election stretched on longer than planned. I assigned basic interview stories thinking it would take just a few hours' work, but a week later I was still pushing for more interviews (this time in person, please). We never made it to the next-step project, which was to use the city list of registered voters we had obtained to try some new uses for Excel. At the time, it seemed more pressing to make sure students understood that they needed to go looking for people, and make telephone calls, rather than sending emails and waiting for answers. Nevertheless, the data hub and other similar depositories of data journalism lie in wait as examples of the new skills we are being called to integrate into our curricula, even as we sometimes struggle to solidify the basics of journalism.

Most of our discussions about changing curricula have centered on the challenge of converging technologies—teaching students to create content for different media. This is a big shift. In this issue, we offer pieces on the use of mobile phones, social media and iPads in reporting. But technological mastery is just a piece of the ever-growing arsenal we're charged with building. In the past couple of years, we have been called on to teach curation, introduce coding, internationalize curricula to create global citizens, encourage entrepreneurship, and incorporate more subject specialties. It does occur to me that if we were to incorporate everything that has been identified in this or that manifesto on the news industry, or on journalism and mass communication education, JMC graduates would be among the most educated undergraduates coming out of colleges and universities. And they would write well, too.

I am being only a little facetious.

Limited resources, time, university structures, and the disinclination of many of our students to embrace computer science and other skills, even when fed in small doses, are just a few of the barriers to creating the bionic knowledge worker, prepared to leap mountains of data and disrupt the status quo. But it is clear that the ever-growing set of skills identified under the umbrella of journalism expertise is evolving in ways that are making it a much more sophisticated field of inquiry than it has been. These new journalists would be prepared to create knowledge and transcend yesterday's news—the reports of events and circulation of conventional wisdom that gets picked over, across the Internet, by all the major news organizations, bloggers, and everyone with a Twitter account. That

news is pretty much shorn of its value by the time it shows up on doorsteps in the form of a newspaper the next day. Commentators on journalism and its future have come to call this content "commodity news" to reflect its pervasiveness, sameness, and limited value. In their examination of the end of what they call "post-industrial journalism," C.W. Anderson, Emily Bell, and Clay Shirky (2012), three prominent thinkers on journalism's future, anticipate an emerging ecosystem that can't sustain this production of news as it has been presented.

> … without geographic barriers to entry, there is very little defensible advantage in running commodity news that's the same as in the next town or state over. Like the principle of subsidiarity for the U.S. government (that the federal government should ideally run only those services not better run by the states, states than cities, and so on), news should be produced and distributed by the people best able to cover it. This suggests a shift to dramatically increased specialization and partnership. (p. 113)

In this scenario, there is both a deskilling and an upskilling of journalists' work, as machines write certain types of news, while more deeply trained journalists spend time on more complex and specialized reports. The authors give some attention to specialized ventures such as the SCOTUSblog, whose legally-trained principals managed to out-report others and attract a broad audience with its reports on the Supreme Court's ruling on the Affordable Care Act, as mainstream networks Fox and CNN fumbled on-air with misinterpretations of the ruling.

> The extent to which a journalist now needs to have in-depth knowledge about something other than journalism is increasing. Exposed by the wider availability and quality specialist commentary and knowledge, a deficit in skills in professional journalism is all the more obvious. In areas such as economics, science, international affairs and business, the complexity of information and the speed at which people wish to have it explained and contextualized leaves little room for the average generalist. The cost of employing highly knowledgeable specialists means more expert journalism is likely to come from those who see journalism as only part of what they do—whether it is the SCOTUSblog founders, through their law firm, or the economists Nouriel Roubini and Brad DeLong through consultancy and teaching. Knowledge can be geographic, linguistic, or in a certain discipline or area of study. (Anderson *et al.,* 2012, p. 35)

More recently, during the 2012 presidential election, pundits took on Nate Silver of FiveThirtyEight.com, the most accurate of electoral prognosticators due to his adeptness with statistics. When Silver put Obama's chances of wining at 70 percent, some pundits revealed incredible innumeracy with their attacks, such as their failure to understand that predicting a 70-percent likelihood of winning was not the same thing as saying someone was 70 percent ahead. For his part, Silver was quoted on the website Politico as saying that "punditry is fundamentally useless" (Allen, 2012).

The implications for journalism and mass communication programs are significant. In 2012, there was much buzz over another manifesto: the letter various journalism foundations sent to college and university presidents in an effort to get JMC programs to be more responsive to the needs of the news industry, in both their research and their training of students. Educators had mixed responses, but Anderson *et al.* (2012) complicate the questions further. They write, "The process of journalism is so being radically remade by the forces of technology and economics that there is no longer anything that might be described as 'an industry' for the individual journalist to enter" (p. 40). They also argue against putting much energy and resources into trying to save something that is inevitably doomed, in this case the "the news industry." The Tow report's vision can be reconciled in part with the vision in the letter from the foundations, but Anderson et al. suggest different paths for JMC educators. Are we preparing our students for the news industry, or are we training them to go out and do journalism, however defined?

I played a little with this question as I revised syllabi for the spring semester. One of the classes I teach explores beats, albeit mainly the municipal government, education, and the courts. Students get a few chances to write on a beat of their choice. But like most programs, we typically train our students on those beats dealing with local government decisions and activity important to their communities, mainly because that's where journalism students have typically started their careers, and often still do. But if they might also start at a local entertainment website or as the social media editor for a health or environ-

mental publication, does that rationale hold up?

The web has made possible various microbeats dedicated to matters as narrow as a school district or a piece of legislation. At the end of 2012, several bloggers began discussing ways beats might be repurposed, with the possibility that some might be conceived as short-term—prompted by former Greensboro, North Carolina, *News and Record* editor John Robinson's (2012) critique of local news as boring, or maybe just covered that way. Blogger Steve Buttry (2012) has two posts with reader comments on the matter.

Although I have had students experiment with microbeat blogs on topics from sweet-tooth outings to efforts to decriminalize marijuana, I am very much a city-council-zoning-annual-budget kind of prof. As I prepared syllabi, I did ask myself: Am I perpetuating yesterday's news? What if I threw out some of the local government content? But I just couldn't give up having students calculate the annual property tax. I still think it's important for local readers, though some of the best local budget stories I read these days are on a local realtor's blog. Realtors are naturals for the annual property-tax-rate story, having a much deeper handle on those taxes than the typical journalist. For better or worse, that example just might bolster the Tow report's arguments. As journalistic expertise continues to evolve, JMC educators will probably find ourselves doing some second-guessing with each new manifesto.

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