



BOOK REVIEW:

Searchlights and Sunglasses: Field Notes from the Digital Age of Journalism

Eric Newton, *Searchlights and Sunglasses: Field Notes from the Digital Age of Journalism*. Knight Foundation & Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute, 2013

Two reviews of Searchlights and Sunglasses are offered here. What is your experience? Share your thoughts by leaving a comment at the bottom of this page.

Journalism is experiencing an era of significant upheaval. Long-established business models that relied too heavily on advertising revenues are breaking down; journalism organizations are cutting resources and employees; and audiences have developed different habits and expectations when searching for information. The digital age has presented journalism with an array of significant challenges, but it also has brought great opportunities, and it is crucial to recognize them.

That is the overarching theme of *Searchlights and Sunglasses: Field Notes from the Digital Age of Journalism* by Eric Newton. A senior adviser to the president at the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Newton has written a first-person, conversational narrative, arguing that journalism shouldn't be trying to merely survive the current digital onslaught but instead should be renewing itself with digital at its core. It must be a priority, not a secondary consideration to a printed or broadcast product. The digital revolution provides journalists with tools to cut through the informational clutter, provide a broader understanding of topics, and engage with their audiences like never before. Journalists must be willing and able to navigate through this new digital age.

Newton provides a succinct overview of the history of communication to set up a larger point: Humans haven't been very good at guessing the future. We tend to make predictions based on current trends and activities, but using extrapolation, he argues, is much less successful than using imagination to see the future. He details—and praises—numerous examples of the innovations achieved through Knight-funded endeavors.

Newton faults academic programs for not adapting quickly to these changes and openly expresses concern about whether much of the academy is willing, or even able, to meet the challenges facing modern journalism. Newton seems to express a sense of disdain for journalism programs that have not made sufficient gains with their digital transitions. As a potential remedy for this, Newton promotes the universities funded through the Carnegie-Knight Initiative as innovative models for other academic programs to follow. Perhaps recognizing that programs with neither the finances nor the personnel to achieve his goals might react negatively to his opinions, Newton admits that his “wish list for what should be done is meant to provoke” (p. 83). Despite his reservations about the academy, Newton is bullish on the employment prospects of journalism majors.

Pedagogically, journalism and mass communication teachers have options if they use *Searchlights* in their courses: It can be downloaded onto an iPad as a

PDF through the iBooks app, and it is easy to maneuver through the text on this platform. As long as the tablet is connected to the Internet, readers can click on scores of imbedded links to access research reports, blog posts, and other materials that support or complement particular topics.

However, the PDF version provides a different, more muted experience than the one experienced by interacting with the text at searchlightsandsunglasses.org, a site that takes advantage of HTML5. Images take on a three-dimensional feel, and many of them are clickable, providing even more content unavailable in the PDF version. Chapters here include interactive features such as a Facebook “like” button and the ability to share content on Twitter. Comment boxes invite immediate reactions to the text.

The website also features what Newton calls the Learning Layer. Dozens of activities here are designed to improve classroom engagement, but they could work just as well as homework assignments. While these activities appear on a single page for quick perusal, the reader can also access them by clicking on buttons adjacent to the text. An instructional link on the home page explains how to use the Learning Layer, and it can even be turned off. The Learning Layer functions in the same way on both iPad and PC.

One challenge facing *Searchlights and Sunglasses* as a primary classroom text is access to digital media and the Internet: Many college students may not own the devices needed to interact with the text during class. If in-class use proves problematic, *Searchlights* might function better as a supplemental text where readings and activities could be assigned outside of class.

Searchlights and Sunglasses is fascinating to read. It provides a host of thought-provoking ideas about journalism’s future and journalists’ important role in this digital era. The book is so full of links to resources and supplemental material that it would be practically impossible to examine everything it includes during the course of a semester.

When choosing it as a class text, one must accept that it presents strategies, programs and points of view that reflect the Knight Foundation’s priorities. However, it is easy to appreciate this work as both a proponent for, and an example of, journalism education’s digital evolution.

Butler Cain is an assistant professor at West Texas A&M University.

The Knight Foundation’s Eric Newton is a lightning rod figure in journalism education. To some he’s a powerful advocate for innovation and moving journalism and journalism education to the digital age. To others he’s an arrogant nag who is too focused on technology and thus is leading us to produce weaker journalism school graduates.

Like him or loathe him, Newton earns his reputation in his e-book *Searchlights and Sunglasses: Field Notes from the Digital Age of Journalism*.

“*Searchlights and Sunglasses* is about journalism and change,” Newton writes in the book’s introduction. “You do not need be a bleeding-edge technologist to understand this book; it’s for the middle of the bell curve, especially for the journalism educators who by now should be changing but can’t seem to get started.”

This is the quandary of the book: While much of it is important for students—particularly in instilling the mindset many journalism educators hope their students will develop—it is written much more for educators. The best example of that is the second chapter, focusing on journalism education: To make more sense as a book for students, this chapter would be better placed as a sidebar or addendum, not in the middle of the book.

Newton writes that the book is “a demonstration project designed to show how a digital book and teaching tool can be produced in months, rather than years, and in a format that can be constantly updated.”

Here the book excels. The responsive design is dynamic. It was equally easy to read on a laptop, iPad, iPhone and Kindle, allowing readers to choose the device that best fit their needs. The graphics are creative and engaging, although some were lost in the Kindle version I read.

Another major benefit of the book is inclusion of extensive “learning layers,” a trove of ideas, exercises and additional readings. These are great resources for teachers, who can pick and choose from more than 1,000 activities. In addition, the linking throughout uses the strengths of digital delivery and provides even more possibilities for educators in accessing source material.

Because the book was just released in October, there are few updates now, but Newton’s intention is to constantly update it.

Searchlights and Sunglasses, by the producers’ own admission, doesn’t aim to replace other textbooks. The goal is to fill the gaps in books with long print pro-

duction cycles.

There is great potential for this type of book, and curating related materials is a sensible method, but there is no doubt that this book—and especially the learning layers produced by a team of faculty, researchers and graduate students—took a team of people a long time to produce. This was a massive project that cannot be easily replicated by everyone.

The book is a joint production of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Reynolds Journalism Institute. Often the book seems self-promotional—although the two do deserve credit for their commitment to innovations that are improving journalism, like DocumentCloud. The book would have a greater impact if there were less about what Knight is up to and how great it all is.

Likewise, some questions seem intended to convince people of Newton's views, like this learning layer question from Chapter 2: "Do you produce journalism for classes that is not posted online or used in student media? Is that a waste?"

The most stimulating chapter is the book's first, "Accepting Continuous Change." Newton outlines what he calls "a history of the future of news," a compact look at the four major ages of human communication: visual, language, mass media and digital, followed by his predictions for the next few decades.

What we now call legacy media, he writes, was itself once novel and comparable to digital technologies now.

"Imagine folks sitting around more than a century ago, one saying to the other: You know, our child never knew a world without daily newspapers. He is a newspaper native. He never knew how long we used to wait for news to come from the other side of the country. No wonder he has no patience. No attention span," Newton writes.

"Sound familiar?"

Science fiction writers have been much better at predicting the future of news than media leaders, he says.

"When predicting the future, it's important to think crazy," Newton writes. "Not out-of-the-box crazy, but off-the-planet crazy."

He then goes on a sci-fi expedition of his own to predict our media world in the years 2035, 2043, 2057 and 2076, writing that such things as Intelligent Media (media we can converse with), Bio Media (implants and augmented reality), Hyper Media (where a human brain can connect to computers) and Omni

Media (all knowing people and teleportation) "seem like a mathematical certainty."

Although Newton's calculation is that newspaper home delivery will cease in April 2043 (a prediction later attributed to Phil Meyer of the University of North Carolina), he offers a reassuring note to journalism students and their parents that there are jobs out there.

"Parents of today's students should feel lucky," Newton writes. "A journalism and mass communication degree is one of the best ways anyone can start an education. It is the liberal arts degree of the 21st century."

After the detour to journalism education, the three remaining chapters are "Freedom, Innovation and Policy," "Community Engagement and Impact," and "Simmering Opportunities."

These chapters provide good information on the importance of investigative reporting, free speech, connecting to community and future opportunities. The book then inexplicably diverges to foundations and to grant writing.

Those diversions detract from so much compelling material in this book.

As an experiment, the book has some room to improve. A better table of contents, or site directory, is necessary, since the chapters contain a series of related articles, which could be assigned individually with direct links. The book also is not searchable, which would make it more accessible.

Still, this is a valuable resource for journalism educators and their students.

If you've been following the ongoing discussion about journalism education, *Searchlights and Sunglasses* is what you would expect from Eric Newton. It's provocative, brash, unabashed, informative, self-promoting and engaging.

Much of *Searchlights and Sunglasses* is familiar not because it's unoriginal, per se, but because it builds off of Newton's extensive writing and speaking about journalism and journalism education.

I plan to assign all chapters, except Chapter 2, in my Introduction to Journalism course. Chapter 1 is ideal for the early part of the course when developing students' mindset about the evolution and future of media and journalism. Chapter 3 corresponds nicely with discussions of law and regulation. Chapter 4 works well with readings in *The Elements of Journalism* about the important role of journalists, and Chapter 5 requires students to look critically at the role of jour-

nalists and information.

The media diary in the learning layer of Chapter 5 is a wonderful, thought-provoking activity for all students. The learning layers provide many more opportunities for activities in a range of courses, as well.

And the best part: It's free, allowing teachers to pick what fits each course.

Aaron Chimbel is an assistant professor of professional practice at Texas Christian University.