



SYMPOSIUM INTRO:

Whither Old Textbooks? The Merits of Page-musty Smells vs. Tablet Texts

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The inevitable call comes from the bookstore. They needed your textbook adoptions for the next semester—yesterday. Often, it can be the decision that makes or breaks your newswriting and reporting class. Stick with the tried-and-true edition of your “old school” textbook or branch out and find something cheaper and more digital-friendly?

There is no shortage of journalism textbooks. The content of those textbooks has been the subject of several studies over the decades, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Results of those earlier studies show that most of the textbooks adequately cover the basics of writing, reporting, sourcing and interviewing. In fact, Bonnie Brennen’s analysis from 2000 points out that in many cases the material in these texts is very similar and almost repetitive from “an ideological perspective” (p. 106).

A decade later, there is critical analysis on how to teach the fundamentals in an ever-changing multiplatform world. In 2010, Deneen Ann Gilmour and Aaron Quanbeck looked at how textbook content can impact “convergence journalism practices on the public sphere and American democracy” (p. 324). What’s being taught in today’s classroom ends up in tomorrow’s newsroom. It’s vital that we don’t sacrifice our principles to teach “computer programming skills” (p. 339).

Let’s take it one step further. Can we get rid of hardbound history altogether and just use an e-textbook? Will students engage better with the material

if it’s accessed through a touchscreen, or if they watch a series of YouTube videos? Not so fast, says Esther Wojcicki in a 2010 article looking at teenagers and their iPads. It turns out that her students preferred paper pages to the digital alternative (p. 32).

It seems that textbooks have become anything but irrelevant, and this edition of *Teaching Journalism & Mass Communication* includes several insights on current practices in textbook use, as well as a study of how journalism faculty feel about textbooks they are using.

Textbooks continue to be the primary teaching tool for college-level journalism courses, but some instructors struggle to find ones that are engaging, timely and affordable for their students, a recent survey conducted for TJMC by the Small Programs Interest Group found.

Results of this study reveal a love/hate relationship with textbooks now on the market. This is nothing new. Most agree they are necessary for teaching solid writing and reporting principles, but it’s difficult to find one that meets every need across various platforms. It is also a race to work with hardbound materials that become immediately outdated. Some in the discipline say we should abandon traditional textbooks altogether.

Nearly two-thirds of the 28 professors and instructors who responded to the fall 2013 News Writing and Reporting Textbook survey said they use a textbook in all of their news writing and reporting

classes. Twenty-five percent use one in most of their classes.

More than half of all respondents said they were moderately satisfied with their textbook choice for a given course. Nearly a third of the total reported being highly satisfied.

However, the numbers don't appear to match what instructors said in the survey comments. Although a small percentage of SPIGsters responded to the survey, a diversity of views was represented. (Many of the 185 subscribers to the SPIG listserv, where the link to the survey was distributed, are not members of SPIG and may not teach the courses that were the subject of the survey. As a result, the response from people directly teaching such courses may not be fully reflected in the 15% response rate to the survey.)

Despite moderate to high satisfaction rates, 13 out of 23 respondents had at least one negative comment about current journalism teaching materials. One of the more consistent complaints was the failure of textbooks to have timely content and assignments. One survey respondent said the textbooks were "all dated by the time they are in print." (Respondents were not asked to identify whether their text was hardbound or electronic.)

One way an instructor keeps content fresh and relevant in the classroom is to use supplemental resources. In instances where a traditional textbook isn't in the syllabus, nearly three-quarters of those surveyed reported using Internet resources, newspapers, magazines and personal materials to teach. What didn't make the cut was an accompanying workbook. Nearly 81 percent of respondents don't use one even if it's offered.

Instructors indicated they were most likely to forgo a textbook in student practicum, media skills or advanced reporting courses. One respondent said of a practicum course, "The work is interactive; I use videos from press conferences, crime scenes and fires for class assignments." Another respondent said "hand-outs are enough" for an advanced reporting course. These are environments where students are likely to have had basic writing and reporting instruction with a textbook in a previous course, and are now producing stories for student media or building a portfolio of work.

When choosing a text for news writing and reporting instruction, 67 percent of those surveyed said student engagement was the top reason for their selection. The next two most important considerations

were price and comparative quality. In analyzing written responses to this survey, there is an obvious tension between finding quality content and finding material with a reasonable price tag. One respondent addressed what many instructors often hear in the classroom:

"Dealing with bookstores is unpredictable and often students say they cannot buy their text if their financial aid checks haven't come through ... The text is costly and students are so cash-strapped these days they might avoid buying it altogether."

How can instructors find the ideal combination of clarity, academic rigor and engaging content that students are willing to pay for?

This issue includes Maureen Boyle's review of one popular text, *Writing and Reporting News: A Coaching Method* by Carole Rich (Seventh Edition).

Instructors must decide the best way to organize and present their courses while addressing various platforms. Reams of information and teachable materials are available free of charge, at the click of a mouse. This may mean, like journalism, it's all about adaptation. When instructors can't find the right content that addresses their particular cultural needs, they create their own. Read Catharine Strong's article, "DIY textbook." Sometimes, it's about finding a marriage somewhere between technical skills application and the higher calling for journalism. Maybe it's time to let the students help pick the texts? That's one of the ideas behind Sarah Maben's "Book Club: Class Session in Media Writing Course."

In an Oct. 17 Poynter Institute online article, Eric Newton, a journalist and senior adviser to the Knight Foundation, urged journalism and mass communication instructors to ditch those old textbooks and embrace comprehensive electronic teaching tools. Newton's solution is called *Searchlights and Sunglasses: Field Notes from the Digital Age of Journalism*. His text contains interactive exercises, video and animation. Newton says it can be updated at any time, and if we are to teach how to work in a multimedia newsroom, we should be using that technology to teach it. Two reviews on *Searchlights and Sunglasses* are available in this edition.

The results of this survey are pretty clear. We need resources that are timely and relevant. We need texts that are engaging and forward thinking, yet don't forsake the fundamentals of strong, ethical practice. With rising tuition rates and student debt, we need

the materials to be affordable. The platforms continue to evolve, but our needs as educators and practitioners stay the same.

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Please also see these related supporting essays:

- “Book Club” Class Session in Media Writing Course, Sarah Maben
- DIY Textbook, Catherine Strong
- Text Review: *Writing and Reporting News: A Coaching Method* (Seventh Edition), Maureen E. Boyle

References

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- Klinger, L. (2013). Journalism textbooks have seen their future and it is digital. Poynter. Retrieved from <http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/journalism-education/226123/journalism-textbooks-have-seen-their-future-and-it-is-digital/>
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