

How Do We Teach Core News Values in the Digital Age? Professional Standards for Broadcast-Electronic Media Students

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Abstract

The author addresses the issue of whether the fundamental journalistic elements: timeliness, proximity, prominence, consequence (impact), and human interest are still relevant. If so, how do journalism educators teach broadcast-electronic media students the core values of professional standards of news in this digital age? While all the traditional core tenets continue to have varying degrees of relevance in the broadcast news industry, the impact of digital (social) media on the news environment has generated unique levels of engagement both between consumers and media entities and among consumers themselves. However, by no means does this phenomenon suggest that news values are less important; rather, it indicates that any story can be reworked in order to engage consumers. Journalism educators must engage students in ways that minimize the seemingly intricate nature of digital media platforms, and strive to harness these tools so they become only secondary to the journalistic values that we want to instill in student practitioners as we prepare them to compete professionally in an increasingly multi-dimensional media environment.

Keywords: Journalism education; Teaching journalism students; Broadcast industry practices; Digital-electronic media technology; Mass communications field; Professional media standards

Introduction

The media environment is at the pinnacle of Internet journalism—large, mega-media institutions and conglomerates are in economically unique positions for experimentation and integration of their “brands” into the web-o-sphere. In a sense, local news broadcasters are leading print journalists in moving beyond experimentation with new technology for delivering their products. Bloggers, podcasters and tweeters, while essentially social media gurus, populate digital communities where the vast majority of our students congregate. And such platforms are where we can work with students most effectively; where we must devise effective ways in which to transform our teaching so that we can instill our next generation of media industry workers with the steadfast traditions of journalism. Among these traditions are adherence to the themes imbedded in five core elements—timeliness, proximity, prominence, consequence (impact), and human interest.

As educators, we strive to engage students in activities that challenge them to move beyond their comfort zones and embrace the learning process. As journalism instructors, we must constantly incorporate the many technological changes that students will encounter as they enter new media environments. But we must not allow technology to drive the fundamental nature of the journalistic process. Our critical decisions regarding what we do should continue to rest on traditional standards of the field. We cannot just assume that peoples’ lives (and subsequently both education and industry) are overrun by digital technology. Yet historically, any assumptions about technology have always thrown media practitioners into a bit of a fluster as they faced the newest mass communications tools of the day. For instance, throughout the development of radio, television, cable (and its 24-hour news cycle), the basic journalistic traditions have remained intact. In the current digital/social media era, journalism practitioners are faced with the challenge of continually providing content to add to the cacophony of disparate voices within the marketplace. As the technology diffuses throughout the social media landscape and consumers are provided increasingly diverse uses for their digital tools, they become more participatory clients – interactive audiences, readers, viewers – who

manage information flow to suit their own particular needs. Some consumers even opt to become citizen journalists. Despite the diffusion of technology, however, the medium is not necessarily the message. The medium is merely comprised of divergent tools that facilitate the distribution of many messages along different platforms. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of trained professionals to provide their publics with solid, well-documented, accurate material that is informative and above all truthful.

In order to remain viable educators who train future journalists, it behooves us to keep track of the numerous technological advances. But in doing so, we must not neglect our responsibility to hold fast to traditional, fundamental principles of the profession—lest chaos ensue! As educators, we’re informed by the evolution of classic teaching models, which have shifted from the practice of merely relaying information to essentially stagnant students to models in which we employ dynamic and transformative learning experiences which are student-centered. Journalism educators have always been able to explore ways in which to effectively utilize such models. We fully engage students on a number of levels as we teach them practical skills and prepare them to perform professionally within an increasingly challenging mass media environment.

Case in point, the impact of digital/social media on the news industry has generated unique levels of engagement—both between consumers and media entities and among consumers themselves. In their textbook, “Advancing the story: Broadcast journalism in a

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multimedia world,” authors Deborah Halpern Wenger and Deborah Potter remind us that a cross-platform journalist is one who is able to work effectively in more than one medium” [1]. Technology changes content; and, “journalists have to know what elements they have to collect so they can effectively present news and information to consumers in [various] media”; that the originality of online journalism includes its ability to meet consumer needs “on demand”—journalists need to develop innovative ways to fulfill a sense of immediacy for media consumers [1]. The “dynamics of interactivity” prevail. Certainly, this phenomenon is apparent in television news and its web-based counterpart. In the local broadcast news sector, with the “morphed” electronic media environment, it appears that as a result “human interest” stories take priority over other types of stories. It seems that a “what’s in it for me” or worse “infotainment” mentality toward consumers often prevails among misguided news shops whose producers are bent on achieving high ratings for their timeslots.

However, by no means does the preponderance of such phenomena suggest that all other news values are less important; rather it suggests to the creative news professional that any story can be reworked so that it engages consumers and in essence meets their needs. Essentially, all the traditional core tenets continue to have varying degrees of relevance. Yet to some degree, due to the “noise” and distractions of digital technology, not every traditional news characteristic has been apparent to us as they have been in previous years. While every story cannot be a “human interest” story, any story—whatever its topic—can be developed in a manner which engages media consumers. But at any given time, for any specific story, the fundamental tenets of news values should still guide journalists’ decision-making processes. So during this digital age, how do we teach broadcast-electronic media students the core values of professional standards of news? While the five core elements remain relevant, which one rises to the top in terms of significance?

ASJMC Insights journal editor James Stewart, cautions educators that “technology is a means, not an end”; thus “clearly technological and attendant cultural changes must be addressed. But shouldn’t we be asking how technology can best be used to accomplish our goals rather than letting it determine them?” According to Prof. Stewart, “We should constantly remind ourselves that technology should not stand in the way of our ultimate responsibility... to communicate with others honestly and clearly. Rather, it should help us to do so more effectively” [2]. Yet, in an insightful message, University of Kansas associate dean Barbara Barnett suggests that “while faculty may perceive mass media as a filter for information ... students see mass media as reality, not filter” [3]. Prof. Barnett’s statement reflects comments by U of K students who participated in a survey exploring their knowledge, attitudes and values while considering careers in journalism.

So how do we teach journalism in an environment in which the “filters” so, to speak, are compounded by various nuances of the digital age? Are we faced with a dilemma, or an opportunity? Well, I’m an optimist. As journalism educators in this convergence environment, to address the situation, we must engage our students in ways that minimize the seemingly intricate nature of digital media platforms, and thus harness these tools so they become only secondary to the journalistic values that we want to instill in student practitioners. And students must be reminded of their essential professional responsibility which is to serve communities of citizens; communities where individuals continue to need journalism professionals who possess specialized skills that allow them to collect, interpret and share information; and provide citizens with information that subsequently

will help them conduct their lives in what we’d like to believe is a free society. Theoretically, we’re experiencing the diffusion of a new (if not popular) technology. And while digital media might propel the message, it is simply a mode of transmission which should not negate the significance of the role of professional journalists who are at the forefront of history.

In one example, and speaking from an advertising perspective, associate dean Rochelle Ford et al. at Howard University suggest that we apply a marketing-centric approach to journalism and mass communication as we deal with students who “do not want to be seen as target audiences, but rather perceived as communities that can be reached through similar interests.” The authors remind us of the characteristics of millennial students (the generation born between 1982-2002), many of whom populate our classrooms. (Also, these individuals will be the parents of our future freshmen students). Echoing what many of us have observed of our students, Prof. Ford notes: “Revering social media ... Millennials identify themselves as multi-taskers who are always online, and they believe social media facilitate connectivity within their busy and hectic schedules.... [They] enjoy ritual forms of communication that draw people together in fellowship and community....” Consequently, “employing storytelling skills is critical to reaching Millennials; rich narratives assist in garnering clout among Millennials” [4].

Well, what better way to maximize certain journalistic benefits of social media than to utilize ways in which to transform students’ communication behaviors into mechanisms for teaching them fundamental journalism skills? For instance, while teaching classes in broadcast news writing and reporting and advanced news production, I developed an assignment in which I engaged students in a multi-tiered process (depending upon time constraints), incorporating several writing elements within creative storytelling techniques for the digital age. Students followed a single topic vein—initially brainstorming story ideas to researching information to developing source questions to interviewing subjects to writing readers and voiceovers, vo/sots, and producing video packages to reworking their original stories and using a central point from which to diagram or storyboard specific web links for online versions of their stories. Final versions were uploaded into a class file. Through this collaborative learning experience in multitasking, students revisited a number of fundamental journalism values—proximity as they developed localized angles for a national or state wide idea; impact as they established how events/issues affected local audiences and interviewed local authorities/experts; timeliness as they worked to complete their stories to inform consumers of the most recent information available. Thus, when pulled together as a nonlinear narrative, complete with links to key sources and additional details, journalism students addressed essential critical thinking skills of news selecting, writing, managing time, and using new technologies to inform and engage media consumers. This idea was largely a result of my own ASNE-RTNDF Excellence in Journalism Education Project fellowship at WRAL-TV in Raleigh, NC, where I first encountered Dreamweaver software that allowed online news writers to provide hyperlinks within the text of stories that they revised from the station’s newscasts.

In a 2004 report commissioned by the Carnegie-Knight Corporation, one-on-one interviews revealed a strong consensus among some 40 news leaders that journalism education “needed to raise the degree of mastery that journalists bring to the field and a new level of analytical skills that are needed to explain a complex world” [5]. Along a similar vein, Deb Halpern Wenger and Lynn Owens’ analysis of job postings

by top American news companies in 2008 and 2009 identified new media skills required by industry professionals, “including emphasis on Web/multimedia skills for broadcast newsrooms and the emergence of social media and mobile content delivery as desired skills” [6]. Indeed, in a 2012 study, Robin Blom and Lucinda Davenport sought to answer the question, what do journalism program directors think are the most important courses to educate all students in a journalism bachelor’s degree program, regardless of internal or external constraints? Their national survey of 134 of nearly 400 U.S. journalism program directors, revealed that while academics agree that “training in writing and reporting” is still fundamental that “knowledge of visual communication is becoming an increasing priority.” But the directors “disagree on which specific courses take precedence for all journalism students.” Courses which emerged as being the top seven core courses were as follows—media ethics and law-58%, reporting (gathering and storytelling)-55%, multimedia and storytelling-47%, writing across the media-43%, reporting (newsgathering)-40%, visual communication-36%, and feature writing-34%. Consequently, writing and reporting and media law and ethics are placed prominently in six curriculum models designed by the authors [7].

One of my essential textbooks for teaching broadcast/electronic media news students has been C. A. Tuggle, Forrest Carr and Suzanne Huffman’s *Broadcast news handbook: Writing, reporting and producing in a converging media world*. In broadcast news, attracting listeners and viewers is part of the process. Broadcasters thrive under the charge by critics of producing infotainment-information presented in an entertaining way; or “entertainment”- entertainment with only a dash of information. In focusing on story selection and writing processes, the authors highlight the subjective nature of decisions about newsworthiness—proximity, timeliness, impact, prominence, conflict, unusual “human interest”, simplicity (for technical reasons), what else is happening, and what the viewers/listeners are talking about [8]. Thus, chapters such as “Effectively using social media” and “Writing for the web” are all too common additions to a burgeoning cache of modern day journalism textbooks, and rightfully so. They [tackle] subjects such as how to engage users and generate conversations with users, talking to users, ask for feedback and drive media users to links for a stream of additional stories on a company’s website. The authors remind us that the inverted pyramid writing style prevails, as does an active (broadcast) voice, and there are added requirements for writers to update and incorporate multimedia into stories online. We encounter the same trend in *Reporting for the media*, now in its 10th edition where John Bender et al. reiterate many of the skills mentioned above as being essential for training journalists for the 21st century [9].

On its training website NewsU, The Poynter Institute touts itself as an early adopter of e-learning as educational communities developed models for teaching in the digital environment. It has become the world’s largest e-learning site devoted to journalism skills training with 225,000 registered users who include journalists, bloggers, freelance writers and journalism students through self-directed courses, group seminars, and Webinars, covering subjects from multimedia techniques, to writing, to reporting, and beyond [10]. As an example, in one of Al Tompkins self-directed web courses, the senior faculty member stresses that the best news stories don’t just inform; they teach, illuminate, and inspire viewers [11]. Consequently, reporters, writers,

photojournalists and producers who want to connect with viewers must tell compelling stories—using techniques related to sight, sound, and imagery that help to engage viewers.

Thus, I echo the sentiments of many educators and practitioners who emphasize focusing on the “use” of technology as a means to an end rather than as a *raison d’être*. Whether we are charged with teaching media students various media “linking skills” to enhance their journalism products or we are training students in the resourceful uses of smart phones and other multimedia devices; whatever our expertise, as educators, we must continue to stress traditional journalistic standards and news values, which remain among the most important lessons that we can offer students as they prepare to become competent media industry practitioners in an ever-changing communications environment [12,13].

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