

Teaching Journalism in the Digital Age

On January 27th, 2010 the day Apple announced the first iPad SaveTheNews.org reporter Brian McDermott was preparing to teach the second week of "Web Design for Journalists" at University of Massachusetts-Amherst. The class, too, was brand new. The topic was building cutting edge motion graphics to enhance our reporting. And we were going to use...Flash.

The salt-flats speed of technology haunts the syllabi of new media journalism professors. Yet for all the time new technologies gobble up, the primary challenge for journalism schools in 2010 is a more basic question of identity: What should a journalism program teach in the digital world?

For much of the 20th century, journalism schools had a bit of vocational school in their DNA. Unlike a philosophy professor – who, let's face it, doesn't expect his or her students to pay their mortgage on Sartre's shoulders – a journalism professor could reasonably expect that good students could build careers in journalism.

We know what happened next. Wild-west economic pressures came from the Internet and robber baron management pressures came from big media companies. Americans wanted more information than ever, but they didn't want to pay for it. The advertising business was slow to adapt to the new online reality.

The effect over the past five years has been to watch the vast middle class of the mass media – daily newspapers, local TV

stations, ground-floor magazine jobs – contract.

Still, most journalism schools haven't seen any dip in applications, and in fact **many graduate programs have grown**. Where will all those graduates work? Is that even the right question for journalism schools anymore, considering the wider value of the skills journalism programs teach? Consider how useful the following three skill sets can be in all sorts of jobs:

- **New media skills.** Journalists who do get hired now tend to be one-man-bands, able to photograph, write, capture and edit video, and then put it all up online. Beyond the media, that bouquet of skills is in demand. Using new media skills to create narratives underpins the public relations, political, advertising and entertainment industries.
- **Critical thinking in a PR culture.** Branding and spin are now household words, if not casual weekend activities. From **branding yourself to find dates** to the **CIA kids Web page**, PR is becoming the default mode of public communication. Journalists sit on the other end of that seesaw. When journalists are good at their jobs, the truth outweighs the spin.
- **Clear, focused writing.** Basic, yes, but this is especially vital for a generation that **doesn't read much** beyond texts and headlines. Consequently, many current student bodies struggle to write with focus and with pith. If journalism programs can train students to write with clarity and purpose, those students have an advantage getting and keeping a job. Learning people skills by reporting doesn't hurt, either.

It's easy to see the negative in the media. Hysteria is loud. It's true that the cable news networks are disasters of disinformation, that some bloggers nibble at a shrinking buffet of other people's reporting, and that some newspapers are so broke they're **outsourcing reporting to India**.

But that sulfuric smell obscures what's blooming. When I tell my students that this is an incredible era to be a journalist, it's not delusional. A good story, photo or Vimeo post can find an audience with a speed and size unimaginable 15 years ago. What's good -- whether it's *The New Yorker* or the Maury Povich-owned *Flathead Beacon* in Kalispell, Montana -- is accessible anywhere. The audience wants information. Giving voice to the voiceless has never been easier.

Which brings us back to Web Design for Journalists. If the iPad gets too popular, I guess I'll have to spend a summer learning Ajax. But the students won't panic ("I just get Flash," one told me a couple weeks ago). Even if they graduate into this tough economy, they will have more tools than generations before to do the good work of journalism: find the truth, and tell people about it.