

common sense journalism

Reassessing J-School – and Your Newsroom

By Doug Fisher

As most of journalism and journalism education is doing, we – at the University of South Carolina – are reassessing what we do and how we do it.

As demand grows for multi-skilled journalists, like many newsrooms we are pushing against limited resources. In our case, that includes the number of course hours allowed by accreditation.

We are questioning what we do down to its basic foundations, much as many newsrooms are doing.

However, it can take months, sometimes years, to change a university curriculum, so it's important to have some framework to guide the process.

To do that, I've proposed four broad areas: acquiring information, analyzing and interpreting information, presenting information and finding an audience.



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This isn't just academic, however. It can be useful in assessing your newsroom. We discovered, for instance, that we put a lot of effort into showing students how to present information, but perhaps not enough into acquiring and analyzing it and very little into helping these young journalists understand the audience.

Let's look at some things you might think about.

Acquiring Information

We quickly listed interviewing and critical listening as some of journalism's most important skills. But too few of us are born with these and have to learn them. We don't teach them as well as we could. What do you do in your newsroom to help your staff improve these critical skills?

In the digital age, developing sources and monitoring the information environment have become more complicated and more critical with e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, online databases, RSS feeds, data mining and search engines far beyond Google and Yahoo. Do you give your staff the tools and training to use these effectively? Do you encourage use of social networking but monitor to make sure it does not substitute for real in-person contact?

Analyzing and interpreting information

This is the journalist's bread and butter. Quantitative literacy, civic literacy, business literacy, understanding news values and detecting plain old tripe all fall in this area.

But the digital tools available to help such analysis, from spreadsheets to social mapping, have exploded. Are you encouraging your staff to use any of them? Are you helping them learn how?

Presenting information

Writing has always been the core of journalism. And presentation has been hot with the explosion of multimedia journalism.

We can still learn a lot here – for instance, many news organizations don't effectively use links online. But when we looked closely, we wondered if maybe we were putting too much emphasis on presentation, especially with all the new digital tools, and neglecting the other important aspects of journalism.

Are you doing that too?

Finding an audience

If we have learned nothing else in recent years, it's that to ignore the audience is to endanger the journalism.

Gut instinct is not enough when your audience can be gone in a click. Effective journalists need to know something about civic engagement, social media and managing user-contributed content, and maybe even a little about freelancing.

In your newsroom, is everyone involved – from the reporter to the desk to the online producer to the person who may have to sell that content in print and online? Can you do it without creating ethical problems?

It's a challenge, but a necessary one because we no longer can simply dip into a river of revenue. Now it's about aggregating revenue streams, even rivulets, and meeting people on their turf, not ours.

You might ask where we put things like law, ethics and history? We'll still have courses on those, but we've also concluded that, just like in a newsroom, they must be part of everything we do.

We're still trying to figure this all out, and you likely are too. But maybe this framework will help.

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