

Promoting Enrollment, Protecting Reputation and Playing Catch Up: Purposes Driving Digital Curriculum Revisions in Journalism Programs

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Abstract

Measuring the results of curriculum changes is common, but in the swiftly changing journalism education landscape brought on by digital media, it is just as vital to look at the factors driving such alterations. This qualitative study set out to identify themes motivating faculty to revise journalism school curriculum within three institutions. Through interviews and surveys, faculty noted their choices were largely reactive, with the hope of gaining more enrollment, strengthening the program's perception, and closing the gap between industry and classroom. Although pragmatic, these reasons for curricula revision could mean frameworks that do not trend toward innovation as much as protection or playing catch up, which would shape how future journalists learn and work at their craft.

https://www.masscomm.txstate.edu/media-innovation/milabjournal/bright_digital_curriculum.html

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Introduction

In both journalism and education, we tend to focus on effects—the crime that was committed or the outcome of an assessment. However, critical evaluations of causes and purposes are vital to understanding the quality and nature of the effect or outcome. In the last 25 years, major changes in technology have affected the professional world of journalism and therefore journalism curricula. Exponential growth in technology through programs, apps, streaming, virtual and augmented reality, and the like, compete for the attention of the public and have become mainstream platforms for journalistic storytelling. Yet, curriculum frameworks within journalism and communications programs have not kept pace:

From 1998 to 2002, about 60% of journalism schools in the United States developed new courses or redesigned their curricula to prepare students to work across media platforms. One study reported that 85% of the university programs surveyed, both large and small, “had adapted their curriculum, or begun to adapt it, in response to the industry trend toward convergence.” However, most changes were fairly minor and were not designed for students to be exposed to high levels of media integration. (Auman & Lillie, 2008, pp. 360-361)

Incremental digital incorporation within curricula was challenged in the 2011 Knight Foundation Report, where its authors stated: “We hope that journalism

programs will embrace the challenge to reinvent themselves in an increasingly digital century” (Anderson, Glaisyer, Smith, & Rothfeld, 2011, p. 29).

Since the inception of digital, journalism educators have been considering how to adapt, integrate, and rework curricula to include these tools and techniques. However, there is now great urgency to not just tweak but dramatically alter curricula. “Specifically, journalism and mass communication programs are at a fork in the road—they can either sit back and watch or take an active role in transforming how our students can enter a new, digital-savvy competitive workforce” (Weiss & Royal, 2013, para. 2). Much of the research about these curricular shifts falls into two categories: essays on perceived best practices or large-scale studies of general curriculum trends. The gap is in knowing what prompts individual journalism programs to revise their frameworks in response to digital demands, perspectives, and pressures. What specific reasons are leading programs to pursue curriculum changes regarding digital media, and how would a clearer sense of underlying purposes lead to a better understanding of these curricular decisions—and perhaps their shortcomings?

Literature Review

Parisi (1992) applied a critical lens to journalism education in the early 1990s; however, he did not mention digital technology, then in its nascent moments. It was not until nearly a decade later that alarm bells sounded to rethink what new technologies and digital media meant to journalism curricula. Adam (2001) worked backward from the vision of Joseph Pulitzer to the modern conceptions of journalism school accreditation, outlining the influences new technologies played on reshaping Pulitzer’s world:

That was in 1904. Since then, some things have changed. In the world of journalism, the media have proliferated. We have seen the rise of radio, television and the emergence of on-line [sic] publications. The space Pulitzer’s beloved newspaper once occupied has shrunk and the technological environment for the practice of journalism has expanded. (pp. 326-327)

Because of this, Adam suggested a curriculum that elevated new media in the hierarchy, which became a largely agreed-upon notion in journalism education, particularly in the 2000s. One of the earlier supporters was Huesca (2000), using the term hypertext to outline the notion that “the fundamental shifts implied by new technologies suggest that journalism education be reinvented to develop practices that are congruent with the imputed properties of cyberspace” (p. 4). Antiquated

language notwithstanding, his conclusions from a qualitative study of journalism courses showed embracing new technologies was useful and worthwhile. Castaneda, Murphy, and Hether (2005) made a stronger case for the new term “convergence,” which intended to break open the silos of writing, photography, and design to create a journalism curriculum that taught all plus broadcast and digital skills.

One particularly expansive study by Sarachan (2011) surveyed 110 AEJMC member schools to explore their curriculum choices. Noting media convergence was becoming more of a permanent fixture, the author found that “due to budget constraints, varying loyalty to the media industry, and some professors’ skepticism and fear of technology, degree programs vary in their progress toward convergence adaptation” (Sarachan, 2011, p. 160). Mensing (2010) noted, at about the same time, that although the implementation and success of digital varied widely, it was now clear that the impact of technology was an imperative as substantial instability had the effect of “creat[ing] an opportune time to rethink (again) the configuration of US journalism programs” (p. 511).

As the Knight Foundation’s Eric Newton commented in an AEJMC address, which affected the national conversation about post-secondary journalism curriculum, there were four “transformational trends” in journalism education in that moment: “connecting with the whole university; innovating content and technology; teaching open, collaborative models; and providing digital news in new, engaging ways” (Anderson, Glaisyer, Smith, & Rothfeld, 2011, p. 26). This call, along with others, altered the trajectory of how journalism curriculum was viewed, and from this point, there became a nearly universal notion that J-Schools, in some capacity, should redefine their curricula with digital technology in mind.

Journalism across platforms became the new norm in curricular discussions, and this transformation was demonstrated by the writings of Cindy Royal. In 2005, Royal encouraged new media technologies to be interwoven into already existing curricula. However, at that time, the author left the implementation up to individual programs. “Whether journalism programs create multimedia sequences, new majors, converge their media platforms, or explore other approaches, the teaching of Web design will continue to be an important skill in which to offer instruction” (Royal, 2005, p. 412). Yet, just eight years later, the game had changed. In a 2013 article, she advocated a solely digital-first curriculum, proposing a digital foundation for all other journalistic skills (Royal, 2013). This allegory is repeated throughout the literature, where absent turned inclusive turned digital-focused paradigms evolved for journalism academics and educators in response to industry changes

(Castaneda, et al., 2005; Castaneda, 2011; Deuze, 2001; Deuze, 2006; Mensing, 2010; Mensing & Ryfe, 2013).

Method

In order to study the impetus for digital revisions in journalism curricula qualitatively, a constructivist paradigm was used to understand specific decision-making and context for three journalism/communications programs using a multiple case study method. All three are four-year institutions with two being public, and one private; they are located in the Southeast, Southwest and Midwest regions of the United States. Institution A had 12 full-time faculty and around 150 majors in communications/journalism, with approximately 3,000 students total at the institution. Institution B had seven full-time faculty with 130 majors and 5,000 students in the student body. Institution C, with nine full-time faculty, had 400 communications/journalism majors and approximately 10,000 students total. Within each institution, methodological triangulation was based on document analysis of the former and revision (or current) curriculum, a survey in the form of an online questionnaire for faculty, and semi-structured interviews with two decision-makers (identified with pseudonyms) regarding curriculum change. Document, questionnaire, and interview analysis were completed through inductive, open coding processes, and in the end, trustworthiness and dependability were established with an external audit, reflexive journaling, and the above-mentioned triangulation.

Results

Through the semi-structured interviews with faculty members Annie and Victoria at Institution A, as well as the qualitative data gained through an online questionnaire, there emerged a theme that a digital-facing curriculum would bolster enrollment. In the former curriculum at Institution A, there were five areas, but filling those tracks had become difficult, according to faculty. A move to combine and condense addressed this issue, as Victoria noted “that all students see it as meeting their needs ... they’ll all get the enrollment to go.” Besides enrollment, an external program review at Institution A showed a lack of digital within the framework, which the report identified as a significant problem. Victoria agreed:

One of the first pieces of feedback: nowhere in curriculum do you talk about digital. We knew that instinctively. One of the pieces in creating those concentrations was the digital media. ... People who are in that area that are in the industry look at our curriculum and say “you don’t have anything

digital media.” They say it more kindly, and we really struggle from that.

A faculty member said the program review prompted the need to redesign courses to “digital-media centered journalism.” Several faculty also said the perception of the program depended on reinvention and mastery of digital skills to compete and grow among other programs, which was also reflected in the document analysis of the previous and revised curriculum frameworks with added skills classes (Bright, 2020). According to Annie, the curriculum change was completed quickly, but such speed was necessary:

We wanted to capitalize on our program review and make the changes that were needed right away because we recognized that they were urgent. That and we had to salvage the reputation of our department. It was really going downhill and ... we succeeded. I really feel like we did. I know we did.

As evidence, Annie noted the program was named as one of the top three at the institution by a dean, and the prospect of more resources after the curricular change seemed possible.

Through the semi-structured interviews with faculty members Dolores and Franklin at Institution B, and faculty who answered the online questionnaire, there was not “some event that’s happened that’s made us say ‘oh, this is what we need to do,’” according to Dolores, except that “we realize we need to probably make some changes.” Dolores said assessment and information from graduating seniors led her and others to think more deeply about writing, even more than digital media skills. Several faculty members also noted a desire to “stay up to date,” especially knowing how quickly digital media concepts evolve. The document analysis and discussions revealed a coming increase in skills-based classes for this reason (Bright, 2020). One faculty member presented a dire picture and said “our program has stagnated. We need to be thinking ahead, not always catching up. We’re at least five years behind the times.” Franklin asserted he would rate Institution B’s program at a “five out of ten” when it came to the inclusion of digital, and he said, “I know this is a cliché; things are moving really quickly. It’s hard to predict what to do, not even to stay ahead of that but to catch up to that. And so from a curriculum standpoint, we’re trying to prepare students for what we don’t know.” As an example, Franklin said they were teaching how to use Facebook from a mass communications perspective, but just as they mastered that, “we just found out that only old people use Facebook. You can’t predict that. So, you start saying we’re going to have a course or a sequence, and three years later they say, why are you teaching us Facebook?”

Although Institution B's faculty was largely measuring its curriculum against previous efforts, several faculty were also comparing the program to others within the institution. Franklin said a separate program recently introduced a digitally oriented course, which caused him to reflect: "And when I heard that, I thought, well, that's a great idea. And then I was kind of mad; why didn't we do it first and it would be over here?" There was also a comparison to similar institutions, gained from reading the literature of other schools as well as visits. Franklin said it was from those inquiries that he broached the need for curricular change:

So, I just went to a meeting one day, and I said we've really got to rethink this. And, I don't think we are doing badly or doing a disservice to our students. They are learning what they need to, and they get out there. But, I just thought okay, think outside the box, and all those clichés kind of clicked in.

As an outgrowth of these comparisons, Franklin said he wanted to see more specialties and subdivisions in the curriculum, particularly "some specialty that we are famous for; I think that would be a draw."

Through the semi-structured interviews with faculty members Louise B and Orville at Institution C, and the online questionnaire, there was a sense that the curriculum at Institution C was long past overdue as it had not been revised in "any notable way" since the early 1990s. "If you do the math, and what was around in 1992...if you hadn't revised your curriculum in any marked way since 1992, digital didn't really exist then, so it's not surprising that it's not in the curriculum," Louise B said. Orville agreed and added the demands of both the job market and the students themselves necessitated an update. "We took a survey in the fall, and they know they want to be able to work with social media, first and foremost, and get those metrics and measurements, and that's our number one need in both curriculum and faculty," Orville said. One faculty member said the accreditation process had pointed out a lack of digital, so they started talking about how to "reorganize the digital journalism component to address issues raised in the last ACEJMC accreditation." The document analysis of the standing curriculum showed a broad-based, discipline-diverse core curriculum, which reflected a liberal arts approach to journalism education (Bright, 2020). When Louise B detailed the core courses of the current curriculum, she said there was only one course that had a skills-based taste of digital media: "And, that's the core. So, are we doing that in our core? Oh, God no."

Discussion

There was a general consensus among all three programs that digital technologies and media delivery tools had necessitated widespread curriculum alteration. The only exception was a few faculty members at Institution C, who Orville noted were not interested in changes or were generally happy with the curriculum as it was. However, the rest of the faculty at that institution, along with Institutions A and B, saw a direct and felt need to rework curriculum with digital at the forefront. The document analysis of the curricular documents showed that Institutions A, B, and C were using similar curriculum orientation choices to address this digital need. According to their frameworks and qualitative answers, all institutions were increasing interdisciplinarity, such as classes across concentrations, minors, or even other majors, so that employment was more attainable for students. The curriculum framework revisions of Institutions A and B also put increasing emphasis on the number of skill-based courses (Bright, 2020).

However, faculty generally provided reactive versus proactive reasons for why these curricular alterations were needed. Most institutions' rationale centered on the health of the individual program, including factors like enrollment and reputation. In line with the 2015 Survey of Journalism and Mass Communication Enrollments, this concern has merit:

Consistent with recent years, we found a decrease in enrollment at the undergraduate and master's levels. This continued trend is clearly concerning for the field of journalism and mass communication as a whole. But our findings are most alarming for journalism, where there was a substantial drop in the number of undergraduate students enrolled in journalism sequences, including journalism (undifferentiated), news editorial/print journalism, and broadcast news/broadcast journalism. (Gotlieb et al., 2017, pp. 149-150)

These across-the-board declines were one of the reasons cited in all three cases of curricular revision. Most faculty members did not mention curriculum redesign in terms of what students were learning for discipline success. Much more often, they spoke of the population and reputation of their programs as the driving force.

The other reason was a desire to rectify the gap between what was being taught and rapidly changing digital technologies in the industry. According to Bor (2014), "[j]ournalism educators have cautiously reacted to technological and cultural shifts in the media industry by considering new approaches to curriculum that more fully prepare students for careers in digital media" (p.

243). This cautiousness, particularly in programs with fewer resources, has led to a present urgency, if not a subtle panic, to progress regarding digital skills and tools for graduates. A few of the faculty who participated in the online questionnaire were quite critical of the speed with which their program was responding to digital changes. “To be frank, our faculty are very short-sighted when it comes to integration with digital media,” according to a faculty member from Institution B. There was a general sense from qualitative comments that faculty members felt they were woefully behind in digital alterations, and the process now was much too slow.

Implications and Recommendations

The faculty from these three programs all expressed the necessity of curriculum adjustment or overhaul due to the changing nature of digital media, with a number of faculty feeling woefully behind. Institutions A and C were prompted by a program review or accreditation process, but the implication is that regular curriculum review and revision, especially with rapidly changing tools and technologies, would benefit programs. Such processes do take time and money, which can be challenging for programs with limited resources. However, for Webb (2015) in her study “A Blueprint for How to Make J-School Matter (Again),” this type of proactive, continual curriculum development is non-negotiable:

Many survey participants reported that their departments only self-audit curriculum once every three years, and that’s mainly to ensure that courses offered are still relevant. At several schools, there is no ongoing, holistic approach to curriculum development. Survey participants cited administrators and faculty who “don’t understand the value of digital journalism,” “meetings upon meetings” in which “one person can completely derail everything,” before a plan is formed. Therefore, meaningful change is difficult to muster. “Many of our electives could have been taught 10 or 15 years ago,” wrote one assistant professor at a large university in the South. (para. 24)

Particularly at institutions like Institution C, where the last major revision of curriculum was more than a decade ago, both mindsets and resources would need to pivot to constant curricular thinking. Moreover, the changes to curriculum frameworks may need to be driven by more than enrollment or reputation concerns, or the fear of being left behind technologically. Webb called for a “ongoing, holistic approach” that is more proactive than reactive, and that is, perhaps, the starkest emerging theme in this study and a thread that would benefit from future research. These institutions’ reactionary purposes

add urgency but also anxiety and patchwork methodology to curriculum revision, which could complicate the quality of the curricular redesign and the outcome of students’ digital journalism education. This is only a case study of three smaller programs, so its general applicability is a clear limitation. However, it may be useful moving forward for individual programs to ascertain not only the desired results of curriculum revision for journalism programs, but also a faculty’s purposes for revision in the first place. If the impetus is reaction based on promoting enrollment, protecting reputation or playing catch up, the quality of the revision—and its longevity—may be limited.

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