

“We’ve Lost the Basics”: Perceptions of Journalism Education From Veterans in the Field

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jmce.sagepub.com**Patrick Ferrucci¹****Abstract**

This study examines the perceptions that veteran digital journalists working at news organizations, the people who traditionally have hiring power, hold concerning how new entrants into the news industry are being prepared by journalism programs. Using in-depth interviews with 29 full-time digital journalists (journalists who only publish online), this study finds that while veterans said educators are doing a good job teaching technology, there is too much focus on it to the detriment of traditional journalism skills. These findings are then discussed through the lens of the theory of disruptive innovation.

Keywords

digital journalism, technology, disruptive innovation, curriculum, in-depth interviews

In 1998, after a call to action from the Committee of Concerned Journalists, the Poynter Institute, a journalism think tank and school that often partners with college journalism programs, created something it christened the Pyramid of Competence. The idea behind the project revolved around identifying the skills journalists needed and journalism students should be taught. And, in the pyramid, “the cornerstones were news judgment and reporting” (Clark, 2014). The journalism industry of the 2010s looks nothing like the one Poynter examined then. And in 2014, the institute responded by updating the pyramid with terms such as “curation,” ‘aggregation,’ and ‘data

¹University of Colorado Boulder, USA

Corresponding Author:

Patrick Ferrucci, Department of Journalism, University of Colorado Boulder, 1511 University Ave.,
478 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309, USA.

Email: patrick.ferrucci@colorado.edu

visualization,' language that was not part of journalism study when the pyramid was first created" (Clark, 2014). While the new pyramid also contains many of the journalism cornerstones that comprised the original, the focus on current industry buzzwords is unmistakable. And in the early part of this decade, industry insiders such as the Knight Foundation pressured the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, the main accreditor of journalism programs nationwide, to better incorporate technology into curricula (Newton, 2012).

Incorporating digital technology into journalism education is nothing new. In the early days of mass ownership of computers, academics questioned whether students benefitted from using computers primarily because journalism instructors remained so unfamiliar with the technology (Beard, 1991). Today, journalism students feel like they need to know more than how to report as these newcomers to the field "frequently complain about all of the extra skills young journalists now need to get hired and create compelling content" (Berger, 2016). However, the connection between many of the academics training today's students and the industry itself is not strong (Chung, Kim, Trammell, & Porter, 2007). Therefore, instructors struggle to understand what new skills or technologies today's students need. These instructors are left with the unenviable task of balancing the need for technology skills with traditional journalism skills (Maharidge, 2016).

The purpose of this study, then, is to examine digital journalists' perceptions of new journalists entering the field. With a constantly changing industry, "the challenge confronting journalism and mass communication educators is how to prepare future journalism and media professionals and leadership for an industry in radical transformation" (Pavlik, 2013, p. 212). Using the framework of Christensen's (2003) theory of disruptive innovation, this study utilizes in-depth interviews with 29 full-time, U.S.-based veteran digital journalists, journalists who publish online, specialize in news and work at various types of market models. As journalistic veterans, the interviewees, and others like them, are in the position of deciding on new hires; their perceptions of how academia is preparing new journalists could provide instructors with advantageous material to incorporate into curricula. This type of research illuminates the gap between instruction in college classrooms and how professionals view the realities of the field. And this study found that participants believe that new journalism have more technology skills but lack traditional journalism skills, which potentially leaves them at a significant disadvantage when they enter the field.

Literature Review

Theory of Disruptive Innovation

Christensen (2013) created the theory of disruptive innovation as a means of illustrating how technology-induced changes can not only significantly affect a market but so thoroughly disrupt it that its leaders are threatened or, even, toppled. At first, he labeled the theory disruptive technology but ultimately altered it after reasoning that people, not

technology, catalyze innovation (Christensen, 2003). When a disruptive innovation enters an industry, the leaders do not simply adapt and move forward because “mastery of old technology does not imply mastery of the new” (P. Anderson & Tushman, 1991, p. 28). Stinchcombe (1965) introduced the concept of the “liability of newness,” essentially arguing that new organizations are more likely to fail than old ones. When forced to reinvent themselves, even well-established organizations become, essentially, new organizations. This happens because after changing or adapting, these organizations are forced to engage in competencies they are unfamiliar with, relatively.

Christensen (2013) argued that when a groundbreaking technological innovation enters an industry, one reason that industry leaders tend to struggle is because they are often not nimble enough to adapt. He wrote that the businesses that adapt best and eventually lead industries after disruptive innovation are usually the ones with simpler products and services and niche markets (Christensen, 2003). In fact, market leaders tend to view, rightly, disruptive innovations as threats and not opportunities and therefore spend economic capital attempting to fend off disruptive innovation (P. Anderson & Tushman, 1991). To succeed after a disruptive innovation, a business must immediately recognize the innovation as such, promptly understand its own core competencies, and move forward with specificity in services (Barrett, Davidson, Prabhu, & Vargo, 2015).

For the journalism industry, the disruptive innovation occurred in the 1990s but began significantly affecting businesses in the early 2000s (Cagé, 2016). The Internet, at first, had very little effect on the journalism industry, but, eventually, with the advent of social media and inexpensive digital publishing tools, it became a clear disruptive innovation as traditional advertising revenue began to significantly shrink (Cagé, 2016). But the Internet is more than just a disruptive innovation economically for the journalism industry; it also significantly altered how journalists do their jobs (e.g., Singer, 2003). Reporters now rely on technology as an integral part of the reporting process, and organizations expect hires to understand how to tell stories across platforms using multiple tools (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012; Ryfe, 2009; Tandoc & Vos, 2016). Consequently, the Internet and the journalism industry’s ensuing focus on multimedia also disrupted journalism education (Pavlik, 2013). No longer could journalism programs simply teach students in the manner they had been for the past handful of decades; now journalism curricula needed to include more of a focus on emerging technologies (Walck, Cruikshank, & Kalyango, 2015). This, in a way, turned departments of journalism education into “new organizations” (Stinchcombe, 1965). When faced with a disruptive innovation as defined by Christensen (2013), journalism programs could either change or not; when they chose to change, they then found themselves facing the liability of newness. These programs encountered unfamiliar situations with, for example, different goals and competitors. By changing and altering their older, stable processes, these new organizations can face uncertainty and unpredictability that formerly did not exist. In general, while stable, or old, organizations tend to flourish, the byproduct of this is that stable organizations have a hard time adapting to change (Hannan & Freeman, 1984), something that historically plagues journalism education.

Journalism Education and Technology

For most of the 21st century, journalism educators have struggled with how to best instruct students. Although it is evident that today's curriculum needs a healthy amount of technology since students will be expected to understand digital tools once they enter the industry, how and how much to incorporate technology remains a challenge (Pavlik, 2013). This challenge is not new. Back in the 1980s, for example, academics argued that mass communication students need to better understand technology or universities will only be "producing a future generation of 'zombies' who will become useless and forgotten because they lack skills to keep up with increasing technological changes" (Adler & Vanden Bergh, 1984, p. 27). That apocalyptic scenario predated widespread use of the Internet by more than a decade.

Some argued that because of the clear sea change occurring within traditional news organizations, journalism education must focus on technology and entrepreneurship, providing students with not only journalism skills but also ones concerning technology and business (Pavlik, 2013). Some also strongly suggest curricula that teach journalism as community focused, as a course of study that focuses on basic reporting skills while incorporating technology (Mensing, 2010). Finding the right balance between the basics and new technologies remains elusive, and instructors have always been slow to adapt to new technologies and incorporate them into curriculum (e.g., Beard, 1991; Singer et al., 1996; Voakes, Beam, & Ogan, 2002). One concern facing journalism educators when designing a curriculum revolves around how much it should focus on emerging technologies: Should they become the center of all curricula at the expense of more traditional skills or does there need to be a balance (C. W. Anderson, 2014)? This uncertainty leaves programs in the digital age more susceptible to failure (McDevitt & Sindorf, 2012).

The view that journalism education needs to balance traditional journalism skills with technology is not shared by all. For example, journalism pundit and academic Clay Shirky (2011) argued that technology should be the center of all journalism education. Besides instructors' relative unfamiliarity with technology, the other potential reason journalism departments have been slow to adopt teaching technology could be cost (e.g., Beam, Kim, & Voakes, 2002; Perry, 1975).

But regardless of how one feels journalism education should look, a scant number of studies discuss journalism education with members of the industry. When the mainstream press reports on the topic, interview subjects tend to be news organization owners or business executives, and academic studies tend to focus on audience, students, and faculty (Creech & Mendelson, 2015). This study, however, examines the perceptions of working digital journalists who encounter and hire new entries into the industry on a regular basis and have for years. Therefore,

RQ1: How do digital journalists perceive the impact of innovation on journalism curriculum?

Method

This study used in-depth interviews to answer the research question. The method is used extensively in the social sciences and allows the researcher to understand a subject matter in depth and to utilize the “thickness” of the accounts given to them by interviewees (McCracken, 1988). Conducting in-depth interviews can help researchers understand what people do and why they do it (Spradley, 1979). For this study, the researcher conducted 29 in-depth interviews with full-time digital journalists—reporters, editors, or producers—at medium- to large-sized news organizations (at least 30 total journalists employed) based in the United States. Some of these participants work at large legacy media organizations, such as the *Chicago Tribune*, but they only produced content for the digital product. The 29 participants worked for 27 different organizations including legacy newspapers, television networks, digitally native political sites, and other newer digitally native market models such as, for example, Politico, Voice of San Diego, or BuzzFeed. The participants’ experience in journalism ranged from 10 to 34 years. The researcher sent out roughly 400 interview requests to journalists; participants agreed to participate in phone interviews. After a participant accepted the interview request, they were first asked, via e-mail, if they did any nondigital work for their organization. If they answered in the affirmative, they were not included.

To understand how journalists perceive new entries into the field, some historical context was needed. Therefore, interviews were conducted with journalists with 10 or more years of experience, journalists who theoretically have seen changes in new journalists entering the field. The average interview length was 47 min. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions meant to inspire wide-ranging and in-depth answers (Coombes, Allen, Humphrey, & Neale, 2009; McCracken, 1988). Most questions for this study revolved around participants’ perceptions of the skills, strengths, and weaknesses of new journalists both now and in the past. Therefore, the questions concerned overall ability, specific skills such as interviewing and coding, and general preparedness. The researcher promised all informants anonymity and confidentiality, and an Institutional Review Board approved both the questionnaire and procedure.

Findings

In the reporting of the results, the researcher uses quotations from participants to illustrate certain themes. Since anonymity was promised, there are no identifiers next to the quotations. When analyzing data provided through interviews, three major themes arose: technological adoption, critical thinking, and accountability.

Technological Adoption

Although the journalists interviewed all talked about a need for proficiency in some technologies, 27 out of 29 thought that newcomers did not have enough training in traditional reporting skills. “We had this one guy come in last year,” said a reporter of

12 years, “and I’m not sure he’s ever written a story. Sure, he could man a video camera well, but he couldn’t tell a story to save his life. He quit after a month.” Journalists said that programs need to offer a balance between technology and traditional journalism, with more time devoted to traditional journalism. “Technology always changes,” said one editor. “If colleges just pay too much attention to the newest thing like mobile media, the students are going to pay the price since when they get a job, say (here), maybe we don’t even use that.”

The participants, 19 of them, said that universities understand that they did not teach technology enough earlier this decade and are now reversing course by focusing too much on technology. Said one reporter with 10 years of experience in the industry and now working at a digitally native organization:

I graduated college in 2005 and immediately went to work in journalism. I’ve been a quote unquote digital journalist for a little more than 10 years. When I was in J-school, we didn’t even talk about multimedia. And I went to one of the best schools in the country. Seriously. We’re talking about 2005. I’d been using the internet for like 10 years by then. But now we get these fresh-faced kids who know all about Pro-Tools and Storify or whatever’s the flavor of the day, but can they interview someone? No. Do they understand the difference between journalism and P (expletive) R? No. But if I need them to cut a video, well, there they are. That’s not journalism. That’s an IT person.

The journalists, each and every one of them, thought schools should be teaching the “essence of technology” more than technology, as one journalist said. What she and the others meant was that universities should prepare students to work in all media, whether it be print, broadcast, audio or, especially, web, and help them understand the similarities and differences between the media.

Critical Thinking

Far and away, the trait each and every journalist interviewed focused on most was critical thinking. Whether they used that term or not, the participants spoke extensively of critical thinking as a necessary skill for journalists, a skill many thought they found in fewer and fewer new journalists over the years. As one reporter and editor with more than three decades of experience explained:

Schools, in my opinion, and seeing how my kids went through colleges, they focus way too much on job skills now. And I think we see that in journalism. When a new person would start back when I worked in newspapers 15 years ago, they always seemed really intelligent and worldly in that they could figure what the story was quickly. Now, we get kids who wouldn’t know the story if you hit them over the head with it. They seemingly have never thought about things before. They never had to put two and two together.

Journalists all thought the ability to survey the situation, understand newsworthiness, and then report on a story was critical to being a journalist. “I know school isn’t the real world,” said one reporter with more than two decades of experience, “yet it

seems like schools aren't teaching kids how to actually understand stakeholders and what the readers need. These newbies don't get context, not just what context is, but why it's important." The participants often talked about new employees needing months to get acclimated to the job because they could not produce a good story. Said one editor with almost 20 years of experience:

We've lost the basics, I believe. I know that with experience comes quality, but what we're seeing lately is pathetic. We've hired people who can't think. They don't seem to understand why something is important. This has to be colleges' fault, I think. I wonder if they are working on any real stories and not only fluff. When you send them out to do a simple story, everything comes back wonderfully. But if any moderate level of thinking has to happen, just forget it. And when I explained this once to a mentee of mine, she just stared at me like I was from Mars. My colleagues all have similar stories too.

Throughout the course of the interviews with all participants, each one brought up a lack of critical thinking skills consistently. They noted that universities need to do a better job preparing prospective journalists to tackle complex stories and to understand how context matters and news tends not be an isolated event. They felt like this skill might be getting lost because of too much of a focus on technological training.

Accountability

The third theme that emerged from data centered around how participants described the overall general preparedness of new entries into the field. For this theme, 19 of the 29 journalists interviewed discussed how prepared new journalists were to fulfill the obligations of a full-time job. As one reporter who works in digital at one of the largest newspapers in the country put it, "Everyone in our field needs to be accountable, not only to the readers, but to our coworkers, our bosses, our sources and basically everyone in a way. These kids today, I don't think they are that."

When speaking about traits within this theme of accountability, participants discussed how new journalists often took the easy way out, did not ask sources tough questions, did not meet deadlines regularly, and did not act independently. In fact, not acting independently came up the most in the interviews. For example, one editor with roughly two decades of experience summed up what 15 other participants also said:

I've never seen a generation that needs more hand-holding. I truly believe this is the fault of universities. There are too many study sheets and extra credit things and too much coddling. Everybody deserves an A and, from my experience with my kids, teachers will do anything to make students happy. There so much less forcing students to think on their own feet and to figure stuff out for themselves. Now they get PowerPoints and lecture notes. They need to learn to adapt to a situation and figure something out. These kids in our newsroom, they just hover over people who have been around or their bosses just asking stupid questions.

Other participants also noted how new entrants into the field seemingly have not worked on deadline. "We did many, many deadline assignments in class when I was

in college,” said one reporter at major nonprofit web organization, “and it made me understand how to write quickly and accurately. We’ve had some new people in recent years who can’t write on deadline at all.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The theory of disruptive innovation posits that one of the main reasons organizations fail in the face of a disruptive innovation lies in the erroneous assumption that “you should always listen to and respond to the needs of your best customers” (Christensen, 2013, p. xxxiv). According to previous research, journalism schools reacted slowly to the technological innovation that encircled the journalism industry, but eventually incorporated a large amount of technology into curricula. The participants in this study cannot actually know how journalism schools prepared today’s new entrants into the field. However, they believe that today’s new journalists are far better trained in technology than they were even 5 years prior. But, according to participants, these new journalists seem less prepared to excel in the traditional skills of journalism such as interviewing, critical thinking, and understanding newsworthiness.

Berger (2016) wrote that today’s journalism students want more training in technology due to the expectations of the field. Although participants cannot know whether journalism programs are not spending enough time teaching the basics, it can be extrapolated that since today’s new entrants are potentially less accomplished in the basics, programs could benefit from a renewed focus on these traditional journalism skills. In fact, since the clear majority of students currently in journalism programs are digitally native in that they matured using digital technologies, it could make sense for journalism programs to focus less on technology. This is especially true since programs cannot predict the future and simply do not know what “may squarely address their needs tomorrow” (Christensen, 2013, p. 258). This slight shift would also allow educators the ability to teach within their core competencies (Stinchcombe, 1965), which typically are traditional skills. In summation, the participants of this study noted the importance of both traditional journalism skills and a vast understanding of digital technologies. They also understood that colleges and universities, like their own journalistic organizations, faced substantive disruptions over the last two decades. Nevertheless, they perceived new journalists as lacking traditional skills, the very skills that prior research showed journalism programs excel at providing (Pavlik, 2013). Regardless of how correct this study’s participants actually are, journalism programs could benefit from slightly reversing the curricula changes of the last decade or so, changes that devoted more classroom time to learning technology, by focusing strongly on traditional skills since today’s students grew up learning technology and presumably can learn it faster than students in, for example, 2003.

Although this study gauges the perceptions of professionals and sampled digital journalists from all types of market models, it does have four main limitations. First, while 29 is a large number for an in-depth interview study, it is hardly representative and this research cannot be generalized. Future researchers should consider a large-scale survey of veteran journalists to examine whether these findings

are shared industry-wide. This study can provide a primer. Second, by only sampling journalists working at organizations, it is possible this study overlooks the importance of teaching entrepreneurial journalism skills since none of the participants take part in this increasingly represented practice. Future research could examine perceptions of entrepreneurial journalists. Third, while the theory of disruptive innovation assists in our understanding of how journalism education continues dealing with a disruptive innovation, this is an admittedly simplistic application of the theory since it typically painstakingly examines competition. However, at the heart of the theory is an understanding of how disruptive innovation affects institutions. For this study, the theory helps explain how this admittedly small number of participants perceives the way journalism educators have reacted to disruption. Fourth, by interviewing journalists with more than 10 years of experience, data only include the viewpoints of journalists socialized into the field during a certain period; it does not include people who could have different views because they entered the field, for example, 3 years ago. However, this arbitrary cutoff was needed to ensure that interviewees had been in the industry long enough to presumably observe changes. The researcher also used this arbitrary cutoff when finding participants to avoid the obvious limitation that older generations frequently criticize younger generations, regardless of industry or subject. In this study, because the journalists have more than a decade of experience, they can compare more than one generation of new entrées into the field. Thus, they perceived generations differently (i.e., good traditional skills and poor technological skills vs. poor traditional skills and excellent technological skills).

This study reinforces that while journalism educators must continue to teach technology in the classroom, a focus should be placed on the timeless skills necessary for becoming a successful journalist. In other words, as one reporter with 18 years experience at major newspapers said, “What good does Final Cut do for a student if they’re editing a (bad) story? Teaching Final Cut is way easier than teaching good stories, right?” Also, accounting for the findings of prior studies that showed journalism faculty often struggle in some manner to adopt new technology (i.e., Beam et al., 2002; Beard, 1991; Creech & Mendelson, 2015; Voakes et al., 2003), it would seem vital that universities should utilize resources such as workshops, books, or paid visits to newsrooms to make sure faculty stay up to date on new technologies, thus enabling them to teach those more seamlessly but also better understand what is fundamental and what is not, therefore allowing for more time on the essentials.

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Author Biography

Patrick Ferrucci, PhD, University of Missouri, is an assistant professor at the Department of Journalism in the College of Media, Communication and Information at University of Colorado Boulder. His research examines different aspects of media sociology, primarily economic and technological influences on digital news production