

University News Sites: Investments in Civic Entrepreneurship

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Response to Francisco, Lenoff and Schudson

The best journalism schools in the country are now providing genuine opportunities for students to do authentic reporting. However, the most valuable of these are more than just classroom exercises that live and die by the academic calendar.

The models vary, with some of them outlined in the worthy “The Classroom as Newsroom” report. You can be a stand-alone community news outlet, share your stories with a legacy news organization, or engage in enterprise or accountability journalism that is syndicated or republished elsewhere.

At J-Lab, however, I have learned that the sustainability of these efforts is just as fragile as the sustainability of legacy news organizations. As with any challenge, however, there are opportunities.

I have come to believe more in the entrepreneurial model of journalism over the teaching-hospital model. Since 2005, J-Lab has helped to fund 23 university news startups in the Knight-supported New Voices program (www.j-newvoices.org). All had very robust starts; 13 are still going strong; five others were last updated in spring semester, 2012. Of the overall total, six have had their university support cut back; two of those were spun out to other entities. Several of these startups have tried to pivot to keep going. Most did a great job with the news, but didn’t focus enough on sustainability. Some lost their momentum amid summer and academic breaks. The ones that are the healthiest are year-round ventures.

One takeaway: Beware of expecting news organizations to pay to publish any of these stories. With only a handful of exceptions, traditional news outlets have proven to be remarkably stingy.

To achieve lasting impact, I think we need more of the “newsroom as classroom” model of teaching journalism skills—and less of the “classroom as newsroom.”

And we need to rethink the purpose of these efforts. They can—and should—involve more than a reconstruction of newsgathering in an age of cutbacks.

For that to really happen, some things need to be tweaked:

- Open the door wider. Avoid cherry-picking only the best and brightest J-students to participate. Sure, you want the copy to be good, but you need good story frames, as well. Include the students who sacrifice an A because they have to both work and go to school. They have street smarts that are grounded where journalists need to be grounded. And they likely can't swing an unpaid internship.
- Cultivate the gonzo journalist. Students who conform to the journalism curriculum may feel like safe participants. But give me the likes of one of my *Philadelphia Inquirer* colleagues who hacked off his pony tail, tossed it in the back of the company car, and dashed off to an assignment. He's still dashing to assignments around the world.
- Recruit across campus. At USC-Annenberg, *Neon Tommy* (www.neontommy.com) founder Marc Cooper interviews more than 100 students each year from all majors to build a newsroom roster that plays to individual interests and strengths—and accrues to the value of the news site.
- Teach operations, not just skills. Sure, you want students who can report, write, and master digital production. But we also need to expose students to the realities of running a news enterprise. Hats off to faculty who are working pro bono hours on university news sites, but we need to bolster abilities to manage people, assign stories, edit copy, solicit sponsorships, and close a partnership or ad deal. As any indy news startup will tell you, their news won't happen if their site goes belly up.
- Master events. Today, events are journalism. Teach your students how to run a money-making newsmaker event and render it as journalistic content.
- Foster university support as part of the institution's broad community-service mandate.

Like many others, I get called a lot by students who need to find someone to interview for a class assignment. Generally, I find their research to be poor and the point of the interview to be vague, and frequently, they are rattling off questions from a list in front of them. These students have not learned how to listen on the fly or probe with follow-up questions. To me, these classroom exercises should not be considered acts of journalism.

Students engaged with a daily university news site, on the other hand, are not only learning to generate real journalism, they are equipping themselves with skills that can serve democracy in ways every bit as significant as journalism has.

University news sites should be investments in civic entrepreneurship, training grounds for a new generation of civic players.

It would be a shame to measure the effectiveness of these efforts by whether they keep news organizations alive with free or cheap labor.

Run well, these news initiatives can teach all interested students, not just journalism students, how to hold democratic institutions accountable, how to help citizens do their jobs as citizens, and how to foster new information paradigms.

To this end, journalism education needs to reach for more than a clinical-skills, teaching-hospital approach. Indeed, it doesn't take much in this election cycle to see how some of the journalistic conventions we have taught are actually getting in the way of an informed citizenry.

Whether or not traditional journalism institutions survive in the long run, we need to impart information-gathering and truth-seeking skills to a broad array of future civic players. It may be that today's student is tomorrow's lawyer or Supreme Court justice. Perhaps they will work for a mission-driven nonprofit that is producing content steeped in journalistic DNA. Maybe they will invent new ways of creating and sharing news and information. Maybe the poorest writers will be brilliant data miners or the next non-narrative geniuses.

If the students are steeped in the passion and values of journalism, they will figure out their contribution to a democratic society.