PRODUCING
ONLINE
NEWS
DIGITAL SKILLS,
STRONGER
STORIES

RYAN M. THORNBURG

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To anyone striving to shine light in dark places,
hold powerful people accountable and explain our increasingly
complex and interconnected world. Your work every day
inspires me to continue looking for new tools to tell stronger stories.

PREFACE

Long before a representative of CQ Press came to my office to talk with me about the online journalism courses I was developing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, my colleagues and I at The Washington Post and the other news organizations where I worked had struggled with the challenge of finding, hiring and then training staffers who had a strong grounding in the traditional ethics and values of 20th-century journalism as well as the technical dexterity and creative leadership required in 21st-century newsrooms.

From a résumé, it was almost impossible to determine a job applicant's actual knowledge or experience. Some had been "content producers" while others had been "multimedia developers." Some had learned how to program ActionScript while studying photojournalism, and some had taught themselves HTML while writing press releases for government or nonprofit organizations.

In some ways this was an exhilarating way to assemble a newsroom—it felt a bit like being Lee Marvin in *The Dirty Dozen*. But in other ways it was no better than the spin of a roulette wheel—unpredictable and all-too-often frustrating. What's more, audience behaviors and technology were changing so rapidly that we would often have to re-write job descriptions in the middle of vetting applicants.

In that critical first decade of online journalism, we were making up the rules as we went along. In the midst of improvisation, we often lamented that there was no textbook that could help us explain to our new hires—some fresh out of college and some making a transition to digital news after a lifetime of traditional reporting and editing—how to manage a database of content, write good homepage blurbs or use multiple media to tell a single story.

That is the lament that I shared with the folks at CQ Press during my very first year in the classroom. And this is the textbook that I had wanted all of my hires to have read.

Initially, the idea of writing a textbook for students of online journalism seemed a fool's errand. I found that existing textbooks intended for use in online journalism courses were either collections of war stories that gave students no practical guidance or technical manuals that provided no journalistic context for the tools they taught students to operate.

I began by outlining a series of characteristics that an online journalism textbook would need in order to be even remotely useful in the classroom as well as carry legitimacy in professional newsrooms. And after conferring with the editors at CQ Press, it quickly became clear that we held many of the same beliefs about what it would take to write a textbook about online journalism that instructors would actually use:

- It would have to be published as a comfortably familiar print edition as well as an online edition that could be updated more regularly than the print version.

- It would need to be comprehensive—well-suited for curricula that teach online journalism in a single course and prepare students to succeed in jobs where they are expected to be jacks of all the digital trades.

- It would need to be written in such a way that each chapter could stand alone—appropriate for curricula that integrate online journalism as a portion of traditional newswriting, editing and "broadcast" courses.

- It would need to draw a clear connection between traditional skills and values and the new applications of those skills.

- It would need to give students the opportunity to actually practice the skills and apply the concepts that they read about in the book and discussed in class.

- It would need to be written in the language and style of a digital native—someone who could speak the language of today's cutting-edge digital professionals and be able to separate the technological fads from the foundational new media concepts that are here to stay.

- Finally, it would need to be a confident and comprehensive guide for experienced journalism educators who eye the industry's rapid changes with legitimate skepticism.

Clearly, it would not suffice simply to write a textbook for journalism. In fact, we had to go a giant step further and develop a transformational experience—one that would practice what it preached about the value of multimedia, interactivity and on-demand delivery. To accomplish this, we created online learning modules that have been integrated seamlessly with the book's chapters. Essential to practicing the skills outlined in this text, the modules turn the passive text into that transformational experience—and in so doing, turn students into journalists.

TEACHING DIGITAL NEWS TO DIGITAL NATIVES

While this book was conceived over the decade that I spent in professional newsrooms, it was born only after several years of teaching journalism students at UNC. I'm old enough to have worked on a college newspaper that did not have a website, but young enough to have never had a journalism job that wasn't online. Most of my students today don't remember a world without the Internet; the result is that many of them take for granted the technology and aspirations that led to the digital media revolution.

For students who have grown up using the Web for research as well as for sharing digital photos and videos with friends, this book may be their first behind-the-scenes look at how—and why—common digital networked communication tools work they way they do.

When I introduce a specific tool or technology, I do so primarily to underscore concepts that illustrate how tools and technology affect news reporting and editing. For example, students learn HTML not only so they can build and repair Web pages, but also

so that they will understand the concept of separating content from its display. This concept appears again and again throughout the book and helps students think critically about how and why the audience is separating pieces of content from their original locations and re-aggregating them with other pieces of content in other locations.

TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM AND NEW MEDIA

Journalists today still must hold powerful people accountable, give voice to the voiceless and explain a complex world to their audience. But with revolutionary changes in the way that audiences consume, engage and even create journalism, professional reporters and editors have to know how to use the right digital media tools at the right time.

The book begins not with an introduction to writing for search engine optimization or with a tutorial about computer code. It starts instead at the place where all journalism instruction should start: with a discussion about the central role that journalism plays in the functioning of modern democracy and free markets. If there is value in training a new generation of journalists, it is not in teaching them to save newspapers, or save newsrooms, but to preserve and extend freedom and justice to all people.

ORGANIZATION AND FEATURES

What is it about the Internet that makes it more than just an inexpensive distribution tool? It is the three pillars of online journalism—multimedia, interactivity and on-demand delivery. This book helps students begin thinking about the opportunities and challenges of online news.

Foundations of online news—Section One—opens with Chapter 1, which demonstrates through specific examples how the three pillars of online journalism, and the tools they employ, can be used to tell stronger stories, supported by historical context from traditional media.

In Chapter 2, students meet, or are reacquainted with, the values that make news "news"—for example, magnitude, prominence and proximity, among others—as well as the core elements that every news story should have regardless of medium: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? With all the tools available to journalists today, these traditional news values and elements provide the essential framework that ensures that we're building real stories—not just adding bells and whistles.

The first section wraps up with Chapter 3, which features recent research that shows how the behavior of news consumers, and not just the creative desires of journalists, is driving a rising demand for journalists who can use technology to effectively report the news. The chapter describes who is using online news, as well as when, where and why they are using it.

A strong grounding in journalistic traditions and an emphasis on discovering and meeting the needs of a specific audience give students a bright beacon that will help them navigate a sea of constant change.

The second section—and the bulk of the book—takes students through the skills and strategies they need to be good journalists. These "how-to" chapters cover everything from which buttons to push in digital video editing programs to which actions to avoid when moderating online discussions about the news. Helpful "TOOLS" sections in these chapters walk students through the latest technologies—Twitter, Wordpress, Audacity, Caspio and more—to lend immediacy to their researching and reporting.

The section begins with the most widely used and most infrequently taught tool of online newsrooms—the content management system (CMS). Chapter 4 explains how this important tool works, introduces students to the vocabulary of content management and highlights how the way journalists think about content affects the editorial decisions they make and the manner in which citizens get their information. The online learning modules are built upon the Wordpress CMS to gives students hands-on experience and prepare them for the content management systems they'll encounter in the newsroom.

Chapter 5 covers another element of online journalism that is widely consumed and infrequently taught—text. Journalism students who are familiar with print journalism's traditional inverted pyramid style of writing will be in good stead. However, this chapter goes further by introducing students to the unique challenges of online text—for example, writing online headlines, the ever-changing art of search engine optimization and, perhaps the most common type of original online journalism, the construction of the homepage summary.

The traditions of journalistic verification are featured throughout Chapter 6, a guide to the use of search engines and social networks for reporting. While today's students have come of age using Facebook, Wikipedia and YouTube, they do not use them with the same discernment that professional online news producers use. Building trust in the community and judging the trustworthiness of others are skills that come up time and again throughout the book.

The vetting of online resources is nowhere more important than in the practice of building links for news stories. Chapter 7 teaches students how to choose good link destinations as well as select and write clear and effective departure text. Links should be used to increase transparency, build trust and improve the relevance of news stories. The chapter emphasizes that journalists have always been linkers and that the culture of linking that is central to online communication affects how journalists approach attribution and collaboration.

Students move away from text and into audio-visual reporting and editing in Chapter 8. The chapter shows how multiple media are being used to tell stronger stories and introduces students to the basics of reporting and editing with digital photography, audio and video. For students who have no experience with these storytelling techniques, the chapter provides a clear and efficient overview. For students who have used a camera or audio recorder, the chapter emphasizes the concepts of digital presentation.

While audio-visual online journalism has led much of the innovation in online news—especially at print-centric newspapers—perhaps the biggest gap between the supply and demand of online journalism skills today is in the field of data-driven journalism. The ability to think of information as collections of fielded data is important for journalists

working in content management systems, infographics and social media. Chapter 9 gives students hands-on experience with the type of basic fielded datasets they will see in professional news settings as well as techniques for thinking about how to collect, organize and present data online. As with Chapter 8, for some students Chapter 9 will serve as a launch pad into further specialization. But also like Chapter 8, this chapter gives all students the common vocabulary and conceptual framework they need to tell stronger stories and work in modern newsrooms.

The last section of the book looks at how the culture of news is changing. It is the section that educators and students are most likely to approach with very different perspectives. Here I describe the uses of social media and computer algorithms in today's newsrooms; at the same time, I aim to inspire students to innovate and take responsibility for building their own civic and cultural norms.

Chapter 10 brings us to the worst sounding and most maligned word in digital journalism—blog. This chapter helps students and instructors step back, take a collective deep breath and accept that a blog is defined by its format, not by its content or creator. More important than teaching students about the specific writing style required of blogs, I demonstrate how blogs and the emphasis on the news value of recency establish online journalism as a service rather than a good, a process rather than a product.

The opening of the reporting process to the audience is happening hand in hand with the evolution of journalism from a lecture to a conversation. Chapter 11 teaches the journalistic techniques that are used when working with social media, crowdsourcing, distributed reporting and user-generated content. It shows digital natives that responsible and meaningful audience engagement requires thoughtful intent rather than haphazard banter.

Wrapping up the book is a chapter that introduces students to the basics of remixing news from a variety of sources and using two or more online tools to create journalistic mashups. Chapter 12 also introduces students to basic computer programming vocabulary and concepts. As much as a concluding chapter, it also serves as an introduction to a new way of training journalists to use algorithmic thinking—the bridge between computer science and the journalistic values of precision, brevity and verification.

Features throughout the text aim to develop the editorial and ethical judgment that is required of all responsible reporters, as well as introduce students to the technology that will bolster their stories. They include

- News Judgment boxes that explore journalistic choices—how to tell the right story, at the right time, in the right environment.

- View Source boxes that place the spotlight on the technology behind specific news projects—like how five editors at Yahoo News can publish more than 2,000 stories a day.

- Real-word examples from both traditional outlets and news-style sites, including ProPublica, PolitiFact, BeliefNet and Global Voices, that showcase journalists connecting with their audiences.

ONLINE LEARNING MODULES

We knew as we were developing this book that it would quickly become irrelevant if it were merely a print paperback updated once every few years. Much like online journalism, the value of this textbook is in the ongoing conversations I have with students and instructors as well as the transparent process of working on the text edition.

You will find me on my blog—www.producingonlinenews.com—and other major social media platforms, frequently posting website critiques, links to new tutorials and new tools and updates or corrections to information in the book if they're needed. These platforms are places where I host conversations with the book's audience—clarifying and answering questions and introducing the next generation of online journalists to each other and to professionals already working in online news.

CQ Press has also published 12 online learning modules—one module to correspond with each chapter in the book. These modules are sold separately from the book, or they can be purchased with the book as a package. Go to journalism.cqpress.com to register and buy or activate the modules.

When students log in to the Web-based learning modules, they will be connected to online exercises and teaching resources and will be automatically set up with their own Wordpress blog that they will use to complete the exercises. Students will be gaining experience with one of the most widely used online publishing platforms simply as a byproduct of working on the modules.

Instructors who incorporate the online modules into their classes will be able to track the progress of each student, collect exercises for grading and provide feedback directly to students.

As students work through the modules, their blogs will become what amounts to a digital portfolio that they can use to demonstrate their ability to prospective employers. Students will have complete control over the privacy of their blogs, as the Wordpress platform gives bloggers the option to make their posts public or keep them private.

Those students will also be taught the full array of Wordpress options on how to manage comments on their blogs. These choices demonstrate not only that students can use the tool, but also that they can apply the editorial judgment that is the single most valuable skill of the professional journalist.

Students who do good work will have a strong incentive to make their blogs public. Many of the exercises on which they will work involve critiques of professional stories and news websites as well as proposals for new features and discussions about current case studies in online journalism.

When the course is complete, students who choose to may export the content of their blogs and take it with them to their own domains or websites.

The exercises for each module closely re-create a real newsroom experience. When students learn about digital audio-video editing in Chapter 8, they are given actual audio and visual files to download and then edit and submit for instructor feedback. When they learn about Twitter, they spend a week in a contest with other students that has them

earning points for performing different actions on Twitter. When they learn about data-driven journalism, they download real campaign finance records and manipulate them.

Many of the exercises are completed online, either right within the modules themselves or with freely available Web applications. Some of the exercises, however, require software applications on students' computers. For these exercises, the modules link—when possible—to free and open source software that students can use. Of course, students can also use any appropriate commercial software applications, from Adobe's Photoshop and Premiere to Microsoft's Excel and Access. None of the exercises require students to purchase additional commercial software.

Learning by doing is critical to journalism education. That's why the online modules also provide students with video tutorials that walk them step by step through a variety of tools. These screencasts emphasize journalistic uses for the wide range of software and Web applications to which students are introduced in the text. In addition to the introductory screencasts that are custom-made to pair with the book, the learning modules also have frequently updated links to the best free online text and video tutorials that can take the most enterprising students into more advanced topics, such as database programming and Cascading Style Sheets.

Every module also has

- a digital version of the chapter's text,
- a glossary of key terms in the chapter and interactive flashcards that use these terms,
- a printable PDF tipsheet that becomes a useful reference tool for students working on projects, and
- a multiple-choice quiz to test students' mastery of material in the chapter.

As the tools change, these online modules will quickly change as well.

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As you must be aware just by reading this preface, this project became a reality only because fortune brought into my life a wealth of kind, creative and hard-working people. Some are dear and lifelong friends while others are almost complete strangers. I'm truly thankful for the blessings that have connected me to them and for all of the wonderful opportunities that have ensued. I could not have purchased them at any price.

The exhilaration and anxiety I shared with my colleagues at The Washington Post, Congressional Quarterly and U.S. News & World Report during 10 years in their newsrooms gave me a true north that I could always use to test the journalistic integrity and practical application of each and every sentence in this book. I reconnected with many of them during the writing process to make sure that I still had a true picture of how online newsrooms operate after I left them for the classroom.

As much as I needed to have experienced online journalism first-hand to write this book, I also needed to leave the daily rush of online journalism. Returning to my alma mater at UNC, I found the same support and freedom that encouraged my first forays into online journalism. Jean Folkerts, dean of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, as well as my colleagues on the faculty have kindly guided me as I came to understand that the challenges of engaging in online journalism are dwarfed by the challenges of teaching other people to engage in it too. Probably the best way to tell you who helped me would be simply to link to the staff directory at the school, but I would like especially to acknowledge Chad Stevens, who helped me more clearly explain video compression; Cathy Packer, who set me straight about the current disposition of legal issues; Bill Cloud and Andy Bechtel, who looked at early drafts of the editing chapters; former director of information technology and services Fred Thomsen for his suggestions on screencasting tools; library director Stephanie Willen Brown for her speedy research help; David Cupp for his conversations with me about Edward R. Murrow; Director of Research Administration Jennifer Klimas Gallina for her help writing grants; Paul Jones and the good people at Ibiblio.org for hosting my blog and giving me a playground to test new tools going back to 1996; Laura Ruel, whose research is cited throughout the book; and Jan Yopp, who let me first test my textbook writing skills by bravely inviting me to be a co-author on her own introductory newswriting textbook. I also kindly thank Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost Bruce Carney and the rest of the Committee on Faculty Research and Study Leaves, which provided financial support for the development of the online modules through a Junior Faculty Development Grant.

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The path of my life does seem to keep turning me back to old friends, so perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised that this book allowed me to work with CQ again. The entire staff at CQ Press has equal parts good humor and dedication to excellence that inspired me to keep going when I sometimes returned to my original thought that writing a textbook for online journalism was a fool's errand. If there is an industry more tied to tradition and more in need of creative destruction than journalism it must be the textbook business. So it was inspiring to find editorial director Charisse Kiino enthusiastically championing my project, requiring compromise on my ideas only when I had bad ideas. Development editor Jane Harrigan taught me the difference between talking about something and teaching it. Both Jane and copyeditor Tracy Villano took my words and carefully showed me what I really meant to say. Working with assistant editor Christina Mueller was a teacher's dream come true. I first met Christina when I was a guest speaker in a class she

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