

# Helping students prepare for future: How journalism educators innovate

Journalism educators face growing demands as they prepare students for a 21st century media industry. Teaching future journalists no longer means just teaching journalistic values and skills such as writing, editing, and ethics. Producing entry-level journalists means helping students develop social media and audience engagement skills, web/multimedia skills, teamwork, and the ability to work under pressure and tight deadlines, according to a recent [study](#) analyzing job openings by the top 10 newspaper and broadcast journalism companies in the U.S.

These changed demands aren't surprising when one considers how news production, dissemination and consumption have changed in the U.S. in the past 20 years. With the explosive growth of social media and mobile devices, the journalism industry has witnessed unprecedented changes in the ways people engage with news: Roughly one third of adults in the U.S. [reported](#) that they went online for news in 2010, but by 2015, 63 percent of Twitter and Facebook users [called](#) each platform a source for news. In 2018, social media sites such as Facebook [surpassed](#) print newspapers as a primary news source for Americans.



With the explosive growth of social media and mobile devices, the journalism industry has witnessed unprecedented changes in the ways people engage with news (Illustration by Animated Heaven)

The journalism industry has responded to these changes in a big hurry. Although news organizations initially focused on merely establishing a social media presence, news outlets have quickly moved to using social media tools in gathering and disseminating news, engaging with audiences, and developing revenue sources. Journalists themselves have evolved along with this trend. The traditional division of journalists' specialties is long gone; today, an individual journalist takes and edits photos, records audio, and produces videos in addition to reporting and writing news stories. They use metrics to monitor audience responses, and follow social media to spot newsworthy trends.

In this dynamic, some of the leading innovation educators have chimed in to share their experiences with integrating innovation into journalism curricula.

### **Innovation is more than embracing technology**

To many, innovation is often technology-driven. For journalism educators, however, innovation involves much more than

embracing latest technological development. Sally Renaud, who served as chair of the journalism department at Eastern Illinois University until 2018, said one has to look at the “big picture” in order to better understand innovation in journalism. She believes that journalists already know how to report news and tell stories, but the bigger question is whether it can be paid for. “News organizations,” she said, “have always been searching for ways to ensure journalism can be financially sustainable.”

Aleszu Bajak, who manages Northeastern University’s Journalism Innovation and Media Advocacy graduate program, agreed that innovation is not just following technology itself. “Innovation is young journalists’ mindset to stay open, curious, and looking outwards,” he said, adding that one should look “beyond the walls of journalism for inspiration on the methods and formats to tell stories.”

Mark Berkey-Gerard, chair of the journalism department at Rowan University, emphasized that innovation is continuous. “Innovation is not a place you get to,” he said. “You’re continually looking for new ways to get information and stories that the public wants and needs and constantly looking for the best and the most impactful way to deliver stories to them in a meaningful way.” In that sense, innovation is philosophical. Nathan Carpenter, director of Convergence Media at Illinois State University, put it this way: “Innovation involves changing relationship between journalism, institution, and society as a whole.”

Innovation in journalism programs takes a couple of forms: technology-based and content-based. At one level, most—if not all—journalism programs have developed and implemented courses designed to help students acquire technological competency. Requiring all journalism majors to take a multimedia journalism course is quite common in many programs. An increasing number of journalism programs is offering courses such as data journalism, data visualization, analytics,

metrics, video production, audience engagement, coding and web development with significant focus on cutting-edge technology. Some [programs](#) are making efforts, although still at a very early stage, to incorporate even artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality, or augmented reality into journalism curricula.

At another level, journalism programs are trying to teach students innovative ways to think about *what kinds* of stories they would tell their audience. Holly Wise, a professor at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University, called her course teaching [solutions journalism](#) an innovation of content rather than technology. "It's teaching students how to practice a new form of news gathering and framing of the content," she said.

### **How are Journalism programs embracing innovation?**

Journalism programs today clearly recognize the need for change. While journalism educators have long discussed convergence, multimedia journalism, and entrepreneurial journalism, today, their curricular discussions are dominated by social media, analytics, AI, and virtual (or augmented) reality. "Although shift comes slowly in academia, I feel that it passed the tipping point," Berkey-Gerard said, "Everyone has come to grips with the change and are trying to figure out how to adapt faster and innovate faster."

Educators are also contemplating how to ensure that journalism innovation is not solely focused on technological advances. Nathan Carpenter, director of Convergent Media at Illinois State University, said a concerted effort is being made to develop curricula that helps students identify disinformation. "We try to teach students better report trends and issues on social media," he said. "Students don't always know when and why a trend on social media matters." At Eastern Illinois University, journalism and non-journalism students are learning how to discern truth from rumors in courses like

*News, Information and Media Literacy and Truth, Lies and Social Media.*

While all journalism programs recognize the need for innovation, some schools are progressing faster than others. A [study](#) based on interviews with 70 deans and directors of journalism programs in public and private universities in the U.S. reported “some significant gaps in efforts to innovate.. including a reactive mid-set and general lack of strategic approaches to innovating.” Those interviewed for this report frequently shared this view as well. “As a whole, they are not keeping up with the shift,” Bajak said. He argued that journalism programs are not producing students with enough skills for positions above entry level, such as assistant or associate editor positions. He feels that many graduates are not ready for what job descriptions are demanding.

### **How students are coping with innovation**

Journalism educators said that they have observed three tendencies in students’ responses to innovation. First, students are invariably excited about innovation in journalism, but their competency varies greatly. They’re interested in learning social media, mobile journalism, and creating multimedia, multi-platform packages. While many students seem to be familiar with web development, a large number of students has a hard time thinking numerically for topics like data journalism. Journalism educators, Bajak suggested, should help students determine where they best fit into increasingly diverse job positions.

Second, while students are experts at using social media for personal uses, they aren’t really thinking about using social media journalistically. Educators found that approaching social media legally, ethically, and professionally is not something that students do naturally. “When students produce media products, they are in independent or personal production modes. They are not so much journalists, but (they are)

personality driven like YouTubers or TikTok celebrities. They aren't coming from (a) citizen journalism point of view," Carpenter said.

Finally, many students still approach journalism in a traditional way. Wise said that innovation in journalism is a "paradigm shift" for students, as many students still associate journalism with writing. Berkey-Gerard noticed the same from his students: "Students tend to imitate what they perceive as the way news is done," he said. "The first instinct is to replicate a traditional newspaper, because that's what they can see and what they can imitate. When I say 'Let's rethink the student newspaper,' that's really scary for them."

### **Challenges and strategies for innovation**

As is true with most innovations, integrating journalism innovation into curricula is challenging. Journalism educators face both individual and institutional obstacles that include personnel issues, administrative hurdles, and technological difficulties.

Almost all interviewees for this article called the slow pace of academia the number one challenge for incorporating innovation into journalism curriculum. Technology is changing faster than ever, but things move slowly in academia. "This is not an issue for some institutions. Across the board, they all have this issue, and it hinders the ability for schools to navigate and teach courses," Wise said. It also takes time to obtain faculty buy-in. There are always those who resist change, and many changes occur in the time it takes to get faculty members on board with a new idea or technology. Another complication is mismatching personnel. It's difficult to find faculty who have industry experience to teach the latest technologies while possessing a strong academic background at the same time.

In addition to structural issues, journalism innovation poses technological challenges. Carpenter explained: "First of all, trying to maintain software that lets you do social media listening has become unaffordable. Second, social media platforms are increasingly holding back academics', researchers', and general public's access. And, third, keeping up with all of this takes constant effort to learn new things. Coding and programing, (an) ability to collect data, etc."

In the face of these challenges, journalism educators continue to search for solutions and strategies to integrate innovation into curriculum. Berkey-Gerard said individual faculty members should surround themselves with other professors who already work on implementing innovation to come up with ideas and strategies. Whether the interaction is online or through conferences, being a part of a community of people who're trying to do the same thing is "inspirational," he said. Wise advised that individual faculty members should innovate their curriculum "even if it is just one unit, one module, or one learning objective."

These educators called for budget and funding at the department, college, and university level. Attending conferences to stay up-to-date, bringing professionals to train faculty on new technologies, and rewarding excellence among students and faculty are all necessary elements to bring innovation to journalism programs. "We've got to find ways to reward faculty and students," Berkey-Gerard said. "It can't be just extra work."

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