J-School Reform: Changes at Scripps For Today and Tomorrow

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Abstract

As Ohio University switches from quarters to semesters by 2012, the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism is forced to re-examine its curriculum. Simultaneously, the worldwide journalistic community turns to digital media to change the way journalists play the game. "J-School Reform: Changes at Scripps for Today and Tomorrow" explores alternations to existing Ohio University J-School classes that can be made right now to accurately reflect the changing media landscape, as well as what can be done as curriculum changes are made. By comparing the curriculum at other top American J-Schools and featuring commentary from media professionals and students, J-School Reform investigates current educational trends and evaluates what skills will best prepare students for journalism careers after graduation.
Introduction

In a letter that appears in the June/July 2009 edition of the American Journalism Review from Kevin Klose, the Dean of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, a parallel is drawn between the rise in popularity of radio nearly a century ago to the rise in popularity of “new media.” As investigations are made as to how the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University should modify its undergraduate curriculum to better train journalists in the digital media world, considerations must be made in regards to the successful integration of technology into curriculum at the J-School in years past, first with radio, then television, now the Internet. Klose’s remarks echo the idea that technological training as it relates to journalism is possible because journalism has not been without change throughout the 20th century.

With a university-wide switch to semesters to take place at Ohio University in 2012 (Pyle, 2008), the curriculum at the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism has no choice but to change. Classes must be modified, some nixed altogether, and perhaps new additions to be added to better prepare students for the changing media landscape. Even before these curriculum changes take place, there are modifications that can be made in existing journalism courses. Curriculum at three top journalism undergraduate programs was closely observed in order to gain ideas for proposed curriculum changes to the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism; the schools were as follows: the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at
ASU, the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern, and the Missouri School of Journalism at the University of Missouri. Each school takes a different approach to J-School education in the 21st century. The Walter Cronkite J-School’s newly revised curriculum looks toward the future, with online media classes required for all students and a required course titled the Business of Journalism (“Undergraduate Courses (Cronkite School),” 2009). The Medill School, a J-School with an impressive reputation nationwide, has jumped head-first into multimedia and online reporting, with a vastly convergence program overall, according to Medill’s Web site (http://www.medill.northwestern.edu/). The Missouri School of Journalism, the world’s first school of journalism, remains connected to the idea of sequences with method-based programs in magazine, print/digital news, convergence journalism, radio-television, photojournalism, and strategic communication, according to the school’s Web site (http://www.journalism.missouri.edu/).

**Review**

At top journalism schools around the country, curriculum has seen many overhauls in recent years in order to better prepare students for the journalism world, which is both changing and has already changed. “I’d be surprised if any newspaper editor would hire a student right out of J-school who didn’t have a good understanding of writing/producing online,” says Jan Leach, a Kent State University journalism professor (Idsvoog, 2007). A comprehensive revision to curriculum was made in 2007 at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona, a J-School that ranked first in the 2009 Hearst Journalism Awards overall intercollegiate competition, according to a Hearst Company press release. Similar to the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, the Cronkite School requires its student to select a specialized sequence of medium in which to focus. The Cronkite
School’s undergraduate sequences include print journalism, broadcast journalism, digital journalism, and public relations, according to the school’s Web site (http://cronkite.asu.edu/undergrad/index.php). While the Cronkite School, just like many other top J-Schools nationwide, places an emphasis on sequencing based on mediums, the twenty-five hours of required journalism classes run the gamut in terms subject matter. Each undergraduate student in the Cronkite J-School must take classes in media ethics, communication law, grammar skills, news writing and reporting, and journalism fundamentals. These classes, which are either categorized as core or basic skills classes, are almost identical in subject matter to the core classes required for undergraduates studying at the Scripps School of Journalism. According to the requirements for a Bachelor’s of Science in Journalism at the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, all students studying journalism at Ohio University must complete twenty-fix hours of core classes. All but two of the Scripps School’s core class requirements resemble classes required by the Cronkite School (“Journalism 221: Graphics of Communication” and “Journalism 233: Information Gathering” being the two exceptions). However, in addition to the aforementioned core classes required by the Cronkite School, the following classes are also required: The Business of Journalism, Intermediate Reporting and Writing (two different courses, one for print and public relations students and the other for broadcast, with digital journalism students having the option of taking either), Editing (for print and public relations students) or Videography (for broadcast students, with digital journalism students having the option of taking either), and Online Media.

While J-Schools nationwide make considerations to require online journalism classes for all journalism students, the Cronkite School takes it one step further by requiring its “Business of Journalism” course for journalism seniors. In an April 14, 2009, New York Times article titled
“J-Schools Play Catchup,” the Cronkite School’s Business of Journalism class is highlighted with much attention, perhaps because it is one of the first of its kind at J-Schools nationwide. The article, written by *New York Times* media reporter Brian Stelter, captures why the class represents a larger shift in mindset:

“The perennial debate about journalism programs — theoretical teaching versus professional skill building — has been displaced by more urgent questions: How can you help students find sustainable business models, while introducing the formerly verboten subject of the business side? What are the implications for the craft of journalism in the shift to digital? And how do you position students for an uncertain future in the media?”

While teaching students cutting edge journalistic skills is a concern, teaching young journalists to think like entrepreneurs is another consideration. In a panel titled “New Media vs. Traditional Journalism” from the April 9, 2009 Schuneman Symposium held on Ohio University’s campus, media professionals stressed the importance of entrepreneurship in today’s students. One featured panelist, Bob Benz (former Vice President of Interactive Media at Scripps Newspapers), encouraged young journalists to create their own jobs in journalism, most prominently online where start-ups are less of a financial risk given the medium, because many traditional newsrooms are in no financial position to hire young reporters (“Schuneman Symposium Panel Two Podcast,” 2009). For this reason, one proposed class requirement in Scripps’ curriculum is a seminar course whose partial duties would be based on ASU’s “Business of Journalism” class.

The purpose of the class, however, would be two-fold, with an emphasis on the uncertain future of journalism as much as the business model of the media business. Throughout the 2006-2007 school year, Scripps Howard Visiting Professional Mark J. Prendergast, former New York Times Continuous News Desk Editor, taught a seminar at the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism called “Journalism in Transition.” According to an article Prendergast wrote in the Fall 2007 Nieman Reports about the experience of teaching the class, “The syllabus overlaid traditional
journalistic values onto new-media realities of the sort I had encountered on the Times Continuous News Desk, a pioneering bridge between the paper’s newsroom and its Web site.”

For the purposes of the Scripps School of Journalism, a required seminar course for seniors is proposed, titled the “Business and Future of Journalism.” The class would discuss forward-thinking entrepreneurial aspects of publishing and media business models, as well as theoretically prepare students for where the journalism industry is heading by examining the ramifications of new media on journalists.

Another undergraduate journalism program examined was the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois. Immediately, Medill students are exposed to cutting-edge journalism training through three required first-year core classes, “Multimedia Storytelling,” “Introduction to 21st Century Media,” and “Writing and Reporting,” according to Medill’s online curriculum catalogue (“Undergraduate Journalism Curriculum (Medill),” 2009). At the Scripps School of Journalism, there is no definitive timeframe that dedicates when, exactly, each student takes his or her core classes. “One thing that should improve is the placement of students into their core classes as soon as possible in their journalism education at Scripps. Once I took my core journalism classes, it really put ideas into perspective about my own journalism education,” Scripps J-School News Writing and Editing senior Susannah Elliott said (personal communication, June 2, 2009). In the switch from the university quarter schedule to the semester schedule, there will be fewer opportunities for students take their required core journalism courses, as well as too many required classes to complete in eight semesters. For this reason, info gathering and news writing could be combined into a singular course, called “News Writing, Reporting, and Research,” which would concentrate on the reporting and research process that is integral within all mediums of
journalism in addition to the specific style of news writing. All students would be required to take this proposed class either their second or third semester while enrolled at the Scripps School of Journalism.

Additionally, undergraduate students studying at Medill do not take the introductory class for their medium-based sequences until the end of their second year, according to Medill’s Web site. These sequences include online/newspaper, magazine, or videography/broadcast. A second class – storytelling – in same sequence is required, but students do not have to pursue their 11-week journalism residency programs in this medium. Journalistic versatility and an awareness of digital journalism are encouraged at Medill through the flexibility within the sequences and the required “Multimedia Storytelling” course. Two 2008 Scripps J-School alumni, Michelle Davey (Editorial Assistant at Columbus CEO Magazine in Columbus, Ohio) and Fred Bauters (Copy Editor and Page Designer at the Elkhart Truth in Elkhart, Indiana), said a wide skill set is what helps recent grad gain employment in today’s journalistic landscape (M. Davey & F. Bauters, personal communication, May 30, 2009). “My job interviewers expected, since I was young, that I would be knowledgeable about videography and online in addition to the skills I gained as a magazine journalism major. I never took online journalism classes because I never thought I’d need those skills, but in this economy, it’s better to be a ‘Jack-of-All-Trades,’ journalistically. Scripps should integrate online journalism coursework before students start classes in their sequences,” M. Davey said (personal communication, May 30, 2009).

The ability to deliver information across multiple journalistic delivery platforms should be of utmost attention to J-Schools nationwide (Lynch, 2007). Within current Scripps curriculum, the easiest way to promote a broad width of knowledge outside of one’s own sequence within the J-School is two-fold. Incorporating new-media techniques into the execution
of traditional journalism is an important step that can be made almost immediately. According to Christopher Callahan, dean of the Cronkite School of Journalism at Arizona State University, print journalism classes teach students skills outside of print journalism at ASU, such as how to upload articles into online content management systems, at the very least (Stelter, 2009). Attempts have been made to incorporate new-media skills into traditional journalism courses offered at the Scripps School in recent times, though some students say technology could be used more adeptly. For example, Professor Ed Simpson incorporated the desktop publishing software QuarkXPress into assignments completed for his Spring Quarter 2009 News Editing class at the Scripps School, with one assignment being the home page design of a newspaper Web site.

According to online journalism junior Jeremy Bookmyer, a student enrolled in the class, the idea of incorporating digital tools into a traditional class is the direction Scripps’ curriculum should take, though he said the specific software used produced outdated results (personal communication, May 29, 2009). “Using QuarkXPress is a step in the right direction, but it’s not working with an actual Web site and content management system. One of the required classes that all journalism students are required to take should involve managing content online,” J. Bookmyer said (personal communication, May 29, 2009). The second way to promote convergence within the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism immediately is to outwardly encourage students to pursue the Carr Van Anda sequence, which allows them to create their own customized coursework. Students pursuing degrees in Carr Van Anda could mix coursework in any sequence with, for example, the online journalism sequence in order to learn both traditional media and new-media skills (S. Elliott, personal communication, June 2, 2009).

Of the three undergraduate journalism schools examined, the Missouri School of Journalism at the University of Missouri most resembles the Scripps School of Journalism is a
number of ways. Within Missouri’s required core journalism classes, requirements for online journalism courses are not included in the school’s curriculum, and students work closely within six different sequence programs, according to the school’s course listings on its Web site (http://www.journalism.missouri.edu/undergraduate/). The pride point of the University of Missouri Journalism School is its use of the world-famous “Missouri Method,” a skill-based, hands-on method of learning that forces students to work as journalists instead of learning about working as journalists. According to a Fall 2008 article in the Nieman Reports from the Nieman Center for Journalism at Harvard, credit is awarded for involvement in on-campus publications, such as the school-owned daily newspaper The Missourian, which is run by professional editors and staffed by students (Meyer). While many Scripps students are active, students should be required, in all sequences, to work on at least one lab publication or firm and/or be involved in existing student media for a minimum of two academic quarters, with one or two credit hours awarded each quarter. This is in addition to internship requirement, because on-campus experience gives students the opportunity to be full-time staffers and be in leadership positions and manage their peers. “Half of what any J-Schooler knows about journalism should come from student media experience, and the other half comes from classes,” S. Elliott said (personal communication, June 2, 2009). Elliott, who served as the Managing Editor at SpeakeasyMag.com (OU’s student-run Web magazine) from May 2007 to May 2008, learned much of what she knows about online journalism while working on Speakeasy, while her classes in the News Writing and Editing sequence continued her education in print newspapers. For as much time as some students spend working on campus publications, they should be provided with credit hours and more support from faculty members in the process, she said.
While students in the Scripps School of Journalism work on lab publications such as Southeast Ohio magazine, a community newspaper for Coolville, Ohio residents, Athens MidDay broadcast program, and news aggregation Web site Athensi.com, there is no school-operated publication that provides students with experience writing, editing, and producing content for the Web, according to the Scripps J-School Web site (http://scrippsjschool.org/). Within Ohio University’s School of Visual Communication, students gain hands-on experience in multimedia storytelling by working on the yearly online publication Soul of Athens (SoulofAthens.com). Writers and copy editors from the Scripps J-School were formally invited to enroll in the Soul of Athens class for the first time in the award-winning publication’s three-year existence, according to Soul of Athens’ Continuity Producer Julia Marino (personal communication, May 4, 2009). Marino, a former Scripps J-School magazine journalism undergraduate who is currently getting her Master’s degree in Interactive Multimedia in the School of Visual Communication, said the collaboration with Visual Communication students such as photojournalists and other multimedia producers is reflective of the professional online journalism world. Designers, Web developers, photojournalists, video producers, copy editors, and writers all work together under the supervision of School of Visual Communication staff and faculty on Soul of Athens to create content, design, code, and launch a new site each spring quarter. Emily Mullin, a junior studying in the News Writing and Editing sequence at Scripps J-School, described her experience working on Soul of Athens as an eye-opening experience, with the class being one of the only ways for Scripps J-School students to learn online journalism in a hands-on way (personal communication, May 29, 2009). “I’m primarily a print journalist, so I haven’t worked closely with photographers, designers, multimedia producers. By working on Soul of Athens, I’ve witnessed the building of a site from the ground up. More journalism
students should be able to experience that whole process, and learn from it,” E. Mullin said (personal communication, May 29, 2009). The integration of journalism students into collaborative efforts with students from various disciplines within the Scripps College of Communication will only deepen students’ breadth of knowledge and prepare them for jobs in new-media related positions, where video, audio, photo, and written content collide on interactive palettes.

**Conclusion**

According to the American Journalism Review, 15% of newsroom jobs were laid off in 2008 (Stelter, 2009). Simultaneously, enrollment applications to top journalism schools have increased as much as 38% from 2007 to 2008 (Streib, 2009). With more students than ever looking for jobs in the media business, journalism students need an edge over their elders in order to gain employment. “The goal for many schools […] is to get students ready to work on multiple platforms in the belief that the strong will survive if they are expert not only in the print or television newsroom, but also in the Internet newsroom,” Lee Thorton, the interim dean of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, said in a letter that appeared in the October/November 2008 issue of the American Journalism Review. The E.W. Scripps School of Journalism has the ability to stay on the cutting edge of journalism by incorporating techniques utilized at other top J-Schools in the country and collaborating with other schools within the Scripps College of Communication on projects that span mediums. By adding classes that bred an entrepreneurial spirit often unfound in journalism content producers and exposing students to technological advances that continue to alter journalists’ duties through both existing classes and modified courses, the Scripps J-School has the power to produce students who not only understand what it means to work in traditional media but new media as well.
References


*Personal interviews cited internally.