What This Class is All About

What does it mean to be a journalist and do journalism in the 21st century? This class will let you explore and experiment with the innovations and ideas reshaping the way news is produced and disseminated in the digital era. Consider this a journey at the bleeding edge of the news industry.

We’ll discuss contemporary challenges facing the news media, with special emphasis on the technological tools and trends rewriting the rules of journalism—think: blogs and wikis, hyperlocal and crowdsourcing, YouTube and Twitter, Web 2.0 and the Long Tail. We’ll put all of this in the context of media work today.

Journalism students are entering an industry in transformation, as new job roles and opportunities emerge. As the industry experiments and adapts in a fast-changing environment, the critical question (for them and for us) is how to mix aspects of digital culture, such as increased collaboration between audiences and producers, with journalistic ideals, such as fairness and accuracy. By the end of the semester, you’ll have a better grasp of the skill set and mindset needed to compete for these jobs or create new ones.

This is classified as a writing course, but even more it’s an ideas course, and the writing you do—in blog comments, in term papers, and in other forms of storytelling—should demonstrate your fluidity with the principles and practices of digital culture. Thus, this course is designed to get you thinking digitally—through timely readings and discussions that highlight key issues and ideas; acting creatively and collaboratively—through work that will require you to build a group blog and engage reader/writers; and communicating across platforms—through frequent blog posts, comments, videos/photos, and in-class presentations. The group projects in the second half of the semester will provide a laboratory for experimenting with the new tools and concepts discussed in the class, and give you hands-on experiences for your résumés.

And, in the end, all of this should be fun.

What You Will Read

1) Textbook: SuperMedia, by Charlie Beckett (ISBN: 9781405179232). The subtitle for this book is “Saving journalism so it can save the world,” and that’s why we’re reading it—because, perhaps better than any other book out there today, Beckett’s book explains the how and why of preserving good journalism (although not necessarily news-on-paper) in a digital age. It also will introduce us to
the concept of “networked journalism,” which is an emerging form of journalism and one that will be a recurring theme in this course.

2) **Blog readings**: Especially during the first half of the semester, I’ll post occasional links to readings via the class blog ([http://writingforonline.wordpress.com](http://writingforonline.wordpress.com)), and expect you to read and respond to them (in the form of blog comments) before the next class session. For this reason, you’ll need to follow our class blog every day.

3) **RSS feeds of industry news and blogs on journalism’s future**: During the first week of class, we’ll review these together and help you get them set up on Google Reader. The goal here is to keep up with fast-changing currents at the intersection of Web technologies, new software, and online journalism. Plus, the reason the best bloggers seem to have an uncanny sense for what’s hot is because they read widely (very widely) via RSS feeds. I’ll show you how it’s done.

**About the readings**: I’ll measure your engagement with the readings through your blog comments and your discussion in class. That will feed into your participation score, which is worth a large share of your overall grade (see How You Are Evaluated section). Now, if I sense that you’re not really digging into the readings, then I’ll resort to quizzes on the readings—but no one (including me) wants to get to that point!

**What You Will Learn**

The course will be taught through a series of lectures, discussions, hands-on exercises, guest lectures, and student presentations. You will be exposed to the broader issues driving the changes in the news industry, as well as the practical skills of blogging and maintaining a website. There are no initial technical skill requirements. I’m more concerned with what happens after the website is up and running—such as creating interesting content and developing a community of users. I’ll also help with technical questions as they come up.

Despite the experimental nature of this course, I’ll still expect and stress the fundamental requirements of journalism—such as fairness, accuracy, and meeting deadlines. Many of the changes in the field that we’ll talk about are making the practice of reporting more transparent and demanding than ever, and having strong basic skills will be vital.

With that in mind, there are several objectives for this course:

1) Build awareness of new forms of journalism online—including *networked, citizen, hyperlocal* and *crowdsourced* journalism, among others.

2) Understand theoretical concepts such as digital culture, attention economy, and the Long Tail, and see how they apply to the work of building and engaging online communities.

3) Develop the ability to maintain blogs through creation and posting of content (text, photo, and video) while also maintaining journalistic standards such as fairness, accuracy, and research/interviewing.

4) Exercise critical thinking in the planning and execution of online communities, such as a building interest in and traffic to a website, and otherwise adopting best practices for successful blogs.
5) Apply this knowledge in writing a grant application for an innovative and entrepreneurial news venture.

How to Demonstrate What You Have Learned

Class Blog and Class Discussion
We have a class blog (http://writingforonline.wordpress.com) where I’ll occasionally post an assignment with links to a few readings, and each member of the class will be expected to write a brief response (about 200 words) to the readings in the comments section. I’ll draw on these responses for the class discussion, so they’re due by noon on the day of class. Also, I’ll expect you to come to class with a few questions or ideas for discussion, both from the assigned readings as well as the RSS feeds you’re following. Speaking of those RSS feeds on the future of journalism, I may ask you to report on what’s being discussed in the blogosphere on a given week. This discussion involvement, on the blog and in class, will factor into your participation grade.

“Weekend Assignments”
While these won’t always take place on the weekends, you will be assigned an occasional out-of-class exercise that might take a few days to complete. For example, early on in the semester I’ll ask you to build a “test” blog so you can learn the mechanics of posting and editing content via Wordpress. Or, you may be asked to liveblog a weekend event, or create a video to promote your group’s blog. For these and other exercises, you may be asked to write responses to these activities on the class blog, like the reading responses mentioned above. In all of this, your involvement and responses will factor into your all-important participation grade (see below).

Group Project
Toward the middle of the semester, the class will be split into 2-3 groups for this term project. After we’ve discussed and brainstormed as a class, each group will set up a blog around a topic of its choice. The goal is to seek and engage readers with a mix of original reporting, creative writing, and timely synthesizing and aggregating of links. Equally important is the chance for you to improve your innovation, community-building, and entrepreneurship skills. Once we start the project in mid-semester there will be weekly requirements for contributing to the project, and you’ll occasionally incorporate photos and videos into your work to complement your writing. Although this is a group project, you personally will receive an individualized grade based on your ability to consistently post content that is interesting, relevant, grammatically sound, and sourced with good hyperlinks. In other words, I’ll be watching for you to apply the processes and tools covered in class, and do it with creativity and passion.

Midterm Assessment
Midway through the term, you will take an open-book, take-home exam. I would encourage you to get together with fellow students to review the course concepts together—even though you’ll end up writing an individual response to the essay questions. The goal here is to make sure you’re grasping the concepts and best practices we’ll examine in the first half of class.

Innovation Project
This final project will come in three parts: a review of the field, a presentation and a final proposal paper. Let’s look at each:
1) **Innovation Review:** After we begin Part IV of the course (see Course Schedule) and jump into issues of news innovation, you'll be asked to pick an aspect of media entrepreneurship that interests you. (For example, you might be interested in crowdfunding journalism, such as that practiced by Spot.Us). Then, you'll begin by scanning the landscape: What kind of innovations and ideas cluster around your area of interest? What has been done already? What hasn't been done? Now, what do you think you could contribute? To answer these questions, you'll visit various sites—I'll point you to some depending on your area—to identify at least three innovations/ideas/concepts that will help you develop your own initiative for news as a final paper proposal. Thus, the Innovation Review will be a one-page, single-spaced memo in which you'll conduct a mini-analysis of each of the three related innovations, and then describe to me (in just a few sentences) the essence of your idea. (I'll give you more details as we get closer to this.)

2) **Innovation Presentation:** Now that you're developing an innovation area of interest and have a sense for what's out there, you'll pick one of those ideas you analyzed in the Innovation Review and present it to the class. Tell us what's working, what's not, and what kind of lessons will inform your own proposed innovation. This also will provide an opportunity for you to get some initial feedback on your final proposal idea.

3) **Innovation Proposal:** For the last day of class, you will write an application (roughly 2-3 pages single-spaced) for one of several grants offered by the Knight Foundation, which awards $25,000 for enterprising citizen media projects each year and, in some cases, much, more money for the Knight News Challenge winners. This application will test your ability to take an innovative and entrepreneurial-minded approach to the future of news, and propose a venture that could very well become a reality down the road.

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**Being Here and Being Engaged**

Be on time. Period. Class will begin promptly at 5 p.m. Being 5 minutes late constitutes half an absence; 15 minutes late counts as a full one. You are allowed two unexcused absences; after that, you will automatically lose 5% off your final grade for each session missed. Additionally, *if you are consistently late to class, your all-important participation grade will suffer.*

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**How You Are Evaluated**

Grades will be determined in the following manner:

- **Participation** (via comments on blog, comments in class, and out-of-class involvement in various exercises): 30%
- **Group Project:** 30%
- **Midterm Assessment:** 10%
- **Innovation Project:** Review, 5%; Presentation, 5%; Paper proposal, 20%

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**Other Things to Keep in Mind**

**Communication**

I will respond to every e-mail, but please give me at least 24 hours during the week (and longer on the weekends) to get back to you. In an emergency, you can text or call my cell: 512-905-7845.
Professional Behavior
In all your communication, both with me and with fellow class members, I expect you to behave in a professional manner. Part of that means not asking questions that can be answered by looking at the syllabus. All in all, think of this experience as a job, or a tryout for one. Thus, be on time, be a team player, be courteous and gracious, and simply be professional.

Getting Feedback from Me
Learning to accept criticism in a classroom setting prepares you for life as a professional. Perhaps not now, but someday you’ll appreciate these tough standards. Remember, whoever hires you is going to be bigger, meaner, and in charge of your paycheck. This isn’t just a class. This is training for life.

Plagiarism and Acceptable Use Policy
Students are required to produce original work without resorting to plagiarism from prior scholarly publications or previously published work. Wherever necessary, please cite all references and sources. Finally, please keep in mind that the work you produce for this class will be public more or less forever, so please think before you say or do anything online that might come back to haunt you.

Late Work
To be counted for participation points, blog comments and other responses to readings need to be posted on time, generally by noon the day of class. When we get to the group blog project, you will have a set schedule for when to post during the week; if you fail to meet your deadline, you will get zero credit for that particular post. With regard to the midterm and final papers, for each 24-hour period that your paper is late, a full letter grade of credit will be deducted automatically. Should you have any questions, please talk to me ahead of time.

Office Hours
Office hours for the class are by appointment, so please e-mail me if you would like to meet. Generally, I’m available after class from 6:30-7 p.m.

Course Syllabus and Schedule
Be advised that, as we go along during the semester, I may change some of the assignments, the course content, or the schedule in which we cover things. Often I’ll make changes based on the interest of you the students—ultimately, I want this class to be fun and fit your new media needs. But, regardless, I will always keep you informed, and will post a revised syllabus if/when necessary.

Students with Disabilities
If you have a disability, please check with me to see if reasonable accommodations can be made for you.
Course Schedule

(Please note: This week-by-week schedule is a rough outline and could change based on events, guest speaker availability, etc. Also, some of this may change depending on the interests of the class. Stay tuned.)

PART I: The Web, Digital Culture, and Journalism

Week 1 (Jan. 20, 22) — Getting Started with Journalism 2.0
We’ll begin with both a big-picture overview of the state of journalism—the challenges it faces, and the opportunities presented because of emerging technologies and trends—as well as a micro-look at a few technical things to understand up front: e.g., What is RSS and how does it work? How do you blog? Just nuts-and-bolts basics of how the Web “works,” which you’ll learn by reading pages 1-68 of the “Journalism 2.0” book (download the PDF online). Focus on chapters 1 (RSS), 2 (Web 2.0) and 5 (blogging). We’ll also take some time to get you set up for commenting on the Wordpress class blog, as well as configure your RSS feeds in Google Reader so you can follow blogs on the future of journalism.

Week 2 (Jan. 27, 29) — The History and Culture of Web, and Why It Matters
Before we can understand online journalism and its many forms and functions, we have to understand the Web itself—not just its terminology, but also its very ethos and culture, and that means digging into the history and evolution of the Internet. We’ll read an oral history of the Web to get a sense of historical context, and then jump into a closer examination of the evolution from Web 1.0 to 2.0 and consider what the change means for journalism and mass communication today. (For instance, how do we “model” the new networked form of communication online? And what is the “ethic of the link”?) Finally, we’ll dive into some readings on two theoretical concepts—digital culture (via Mark Deuze) and convergence culture (via Henry Jenkins)—that work together in helping us “get” the Web: its sensibilities, its “people,” and its participatory patterns in today’s social media.

Week 3 (Feb. 3, 5) — The State of the News Media (Pro and Amateur)
All of this talk about the Web and its culture brings us to the most relevant question: What does this mean for journalism and its future in the digital era? By reading theintroductory chapters of SuperMedia, you’ll get a better feel for the precarious and yet promising setting for journalism at the start of the 21st century. During this week, we’ll spend a day each exploring the current state of affairs for professional journalism (hint: it’s not pretty!) and citizen journalism alike. Some questions to consider: What’s being lost, gained, and otherwise changed through the digitization of news and information? What’s happening to journalism jobs as media work becomes more “liquid” and “atypical”? What qualifies as a “citizen” media site? To what extent are they truly “open” to the public?

PART II: Bringing the Audience In

Week 4 (Feb. 10, 12) — Blogs, Networks, and Citizens in Journalism

Week 5 (Feb. 17, 19) — Crowds, Niches, and New Strategies for Building Communities

Week 6 (Feb. 24-26) — Midterm Week

PART III: Putting Knowledge Into Practice
Week 7 (March 3, 5) — Getting Started on the Group Blog Projects

Week 8 (March 10, 12) — Best Practices in Blogging: Being Effective and Being Ethical

**Week 9 (March 17, 19) — SPRING BREAK, NO CLASS**

Week 10 (24, 26) — Multimedia: Photos, Audio, and Video on Blogs

Week 11 (March 31, April 2) — News on the Go: Mobile Tech, Twitter, and Cellphone Journalism

**PART IV: Innovation and the Future of News**

Week 12 (April 7, 9) — Bringing an Entrepreneurial Mind to Journalism, and New Models for News

Week 13 (April 14, 16) — Stories from Innovators: Link Journalism, Crowdfunding News, and SEO

Week 14 (April 21, 23) — Student Presentations

Week 15 (April 28, 30) — Working in the Field: Tools of the "MoJo," Resume Workshop, and Online Journalism Symposium

Week 16 (May 5, 7) — News in the Future and Course Wrap-Up