J 349T Writing for Online Publication: The Future of Journalism

School of Journalism, University of Texas at Austin
Fall 2009  •  Tues/Thurs, 8-9:30 a.m., CMA A4.308

Instructor: Seth C. Lewis, sethclewis@gmail.com

Office hours: By appointment (e-mail me or text me at 512-739-2492); meet in UA9 2.106

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 journalism.

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, Long Tail and link economy, Twitter and Google, crowdsourcing and social media. The point is not to get caught up in the quickening pace of change, but to focus instead on what we can contribute to the ongoing innovation of journalism.

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 the Web and its 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.

What’s more, this is an innovation course. The capstone of the class involves preparing and submitting an application to fund a news start-up venture. Participating in the Knight News Challenge grant process will test your ability to integrate the principles of the Web, the best practices of journalism, and emerging models for news.

And, in the end, all of this should be fun.
What You Will Read

1) Required Books: You need to buy these, and can easily find them online at Amazon or elsewhere:
   “Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations,” by Clay Shirky
   “What Would Google Do?” by Jeff Jarvis

2) Book excerpts: I’ll provide PDFs of these as we go along during the semester ... chapters from:
   “Journalism 2.0: How to Survive and Thrive,” by Mark Briggs
   “Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide,” by Henry Jenkins
   “Media Work,” by Mark Deuze
   “The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More,” by Chris Anderson
   “Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive,” by Lawrence Lessig
   “Say Everything: How Blogging Began, What It's Becoming, and Why It Matters,” by Scott Rosenberg
   “SuperMedia: Saving Journalism So It Can Save the World,” by Charlie Beckett

3) Blog readings: Especially during the first half of the semester, I'll be posting links to those book excerpts and other readings from around the Web. I’ll post these to our class blog (http://writingforonline.wordpress.com), and will expect you to read and respond to them (in the form of blog comments) before the next class session. For this reason, you need to make a habit of visiting the class blog regularly.

4) RSS feeds of industry news and blogs on journalism's future: Early on, I'll review these in class 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 journalism—in short, plug into the “future of journalism” community. 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. [Note: I might move this link-tracking activity over to Twitter as the semester progresses. Stay tuned.]

In sum: Yes, this is a lot of reading—probably far more than you're used to in a journalism course. I recognize that, and so I’ll try to be selective in assigning you only the most salient book chapters and articles online. Thus, you need to take these seriously. Your engagement with the readings, which you’ll demonstrate through blog comments and in-class discussions, is an important component in your final grade (see below: How You Are Evaluated). Now, if I sense that you’re not really digging into the readings, 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.

The ultimate goal is to learn how you can contribute to ongoing innovations in journalism.
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) Understand the tools and culture of the Web, so as to grasp how digitization is changing media and society and what it means for approaching innovation in journalism.

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

3) Develop the ability to build a successful blog, showcasing effective writing and use of multimedia elements, while also maintaining journalistic standards such as fairness, accuracy, and reporting.

4) Exercise critical thinking in the use of social media for journalistic purposes, understanding best practices for organizing online communities through outreach, visibility, transparency, and so forth.

5) Apply this knowledge in writing a grant application for an innovative and entrepreneurial news venture.

How to Demonstrate What You Have Learned

Sharing, in Class and on the Blog
We have a class blog (http://writingforonline.wordpress.com) where I’ll often post assignments with links to readings, and each member of the class will be expected to write a brief response (about 200 words) in the comments section. These comments should be critique and analysis—more than mere summary. I’ll draw on these responses for the class discussion, so they’re due by 8 p.m. the night before 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.

“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 an event, or create a video to promote your group’s blog. Often, these activities will involve experimenting with social media tools. For these exercises, you may be asked to write responses 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 Blog 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, readable, 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.

Innovation Project
This major project will come in three parts:
(1) a review of the Knight News Challenge field (a pro-con analysis of the winners and losers of years past, in light of the principles we’ve covered in the first half of class);
(2) a presentation on a topic of interest to you (drawing on key examples of media innovations); and
(3) an actual grant application to the News Challenge. The purpose here is to test your ability to take an innovative and entrepreneurial-minded approach to the future of news, and propose a venture that could generate real money and real opportunity. I'll explain all of this further as we proceed (and as KNC opens the application period Sept. 1).

Final Paper
To finish off the class, you’ll turn in an essay (3 pages, single-spaced) on the future of news. The goal will be integrate the full spectrum of readings we’ve covered with your own interpretation of what journalism ought to be in the digital age. Details to come later in the term.

Being Here and Being Engaged
Be on time. Period. Class will begin promptly at 8 a.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 participation grade will suffer.

How You Are Evaluated
Grades will be determined in the following manner:
• Innovation Project: 35% total—Review, 5%; Presentation, 5%; Paper proposal, 25%
• Participation (comments on blog, comments in class, and overall engagement): 30%
• Group Blogging Project: 25%
• Final Paper: 10%

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: 512-739-2492.

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 8 p.m. before the next day’s 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 9:30-11:00 a.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.)

Week 1 (Aug. 27) — Getting started: Intros, overviews, student survey, and RSS readers

Week 2 (Sept. 1, 3) — Backgrounder: How we got the Web, how it works, and why that matters

Week 3 (Sept. 8, 10) — Tools and Culture: Digitization, convergence, and the social Web today

Week 4 (Sept. 15, 17) — The State of Journalism: crisis, solutions, and the great debate about the future

Week 5 (Sept. 22, 24) — New Models for News: crowds, citizens, and the hyperlocal turn

Week 6 (Sept. 29, Oct. 1) — Blogging: Writing styles, digital ethics, and best practices

Week 7 (Oct. 6, 8) — The Group Project: Getting our blogs organized and off the ground
[Blogging begins Monday, Oct. 12, and continues the last day of class]

Week 8 (Oct. 13, 15) — The Innovation Project: Bringing an entrepreneurial mind to newwork

Week 9 (Oct. 20, 22) — Student Presentations: Key cases of innovation in media and journalism
[Rough draft of KNC proposal due via e-mail, Monday, Oct. 19, at 9 a.m. For feedback only.]

Week 10 (Oct. 27, 29) — Workshops: Finalizing our Knight News Challenge innovation proposals
[Tentative: KNC proposals due Monday, Nov. 2; version goes to instructor for a grade]

Week 11 (Nov. 3, 5) — Review and Recap: Catch up with group blogs and social media topics

Week 12 (Nov. 10, 12) — Video and Data Visualization: Extending online journalism

Week 13 (Nov. 17, 19) — Going Mobile: Doing journalism on the fly and on your cell phone

Week 14 (Nov. 24, 26) — You, the Brand: Building your personal presence online

Week 15 (Dec. 1, 3) — Jobs Week: Careers and resume workshops
[Final papers due via e-mail by the last day of class, Friday, Dec. 4; blog project ends Dec. 4]