

Adapting to the Changing Media Landscape

The Story of The Blue Banner

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Abstract

This paper chronicles the obstacles encountered by the advisor and staff of a small college newspaper attempting to make the paradigm shift from a traditional weekly college newspaper to a multiplatform system. The traditional college print newspaper runs the risk of becoming antiquated as more young adults seek news from digital and social media platforms (Hubbard 2011; Beaujon 2012; The demographic 2012). Within this case study, the authors discuss the growing need for academic departments to abandon “silos” within mass communication in order to embrace the multiplatform approach to reporting and the strategic use of social networks to attract a college audience. While college students embrace social networks as the primary fountain of knowledge, the adviser and staff question how best to achieve a social identity for their college newspaper.

Introduction

For generations, working on the college newspaper was a training ground for aspiring journalists and editors. The skills learned on campus translated directly to entry-level positions that graduates enthusiastically filled. Cuts in newsroom staff have meant increased opportunities for college interns who often find themselves in the role of teacher for less technology savvy reporters (Thornton 2011). Increasingly newspapers seek interns possessing web and multimedia skills as well as strong writing skills (Wenger 2011). Keeping pace with the dramatic changes experienced in newsrooms across the country presents a challenge for college newspapers, particularly college newspapers at small colleges.

The traditional college print newspaper runs the risk of becoming antiquated as more young adults seek news from digital and social media platforms (Hubbard 2011; Beaujon 2012; The demographic 2012). Aspiring journalists need to be content-driven, producing copy for print as well as for social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Hubbard 2011). Journalists compete with the everyday person who is both a media producer and consumer (Buckingham, Harvey and Sefton-Green 1999; Jenkins 2006). This paper examines the transformation of The Blue Banner, the student newspaper at the University of North Carolina Asheville, from print to a multimedia format.

Conceptual framework

The Role of the Newspaper

The role of the newspaper in society has always been multifaceted. A newspaper is foremost a conduit between citizens and their government; next it informs a society about itself, provides a necessary means for challenging authority and seeking accountability and serves as a form of entertainment (Rusbridger 2005). Historically, the content and style of print news

have been driven by technology. Technological determinism, the concept that new technology influences economy and culture, has been evidenced from the advent of mass circulation to dominant headlines from the local perspective to computer-assisted reporting (Pavlik 2000, Boczkowski 2004, Franklin 2008). The characteristics of print news have forever changed; the saying “putting the newspaper to bed” has been antiquated since news deadlines became rolling; print news is now a second-line product (Hall 2008). Additionally, newspaper readers are also online newspaper contributors who seek to learn the opinions of other readers on various topics (Hall 2008).

College students are less likely to read newspapers than older people and less likely to watch network news (Diddi and LaRose 2006, Trends 2012). However, students have shown an allegiance to their college newspaper over a free, regional daily newspaper (Collins and Armstrong 2008). Whether on a college campus or within a city, readers possess a stronger relationship with print news for a sense of their community (Mersey 2009).

Adopting new technology

For many seasoned professional journalists, newsroom changes aren't about adapting from print journalism to online journalism, but more so the shift in journalism philosophy that impedes their acceptance of online news strategies often referred to as watered-down journalism (Reinardy 2010; Thornton 2011). Although triggered by technological developments, adoption processes are shaped by organizational structure, work practices and representation of users (Boczkowski 2004). Organizational development theory (Lewin 1947) posits that a series of time-ordered events must typically occur in order to adopt a new process – preparing for change, implementing change and creating acceptance of the change – in order to return to a state of normalcy.

Technology enables communication while embedding social and cultural practices (Jenkins 2006). With Web 2.0, the journalism community witnessed the rise of social media and the continued decline in the social status of print journalism, which seemed incongruent given that online news sites have increasingly been considered an “inferior good” to the “normal good” of print news (Chyi and Lewis 2009, p. 48; Russial 2009). Journalists today are cross-platform content providers (Franklin 2008). Faculty across the nation struggle to fill the gap between academia and the media profession as the profession favors skills courses and academia favor conceptual ones (Dickson and Brandon 2002). Academics are constantly reminded not to teach to the media platform, but to encourage better journalism (Franklin 2008). However, the ability to write for multiple platforms must be coupled with a foundation in basic journalism skills (Pierce and Miller 2007).

The Pew Research Center's biennial survey found 50 percent of Americans follow news on a digital device rather than a newspaper or a radio station (Beaujon 2012; Trends 2012). College graduates are more likely than those with less education to use a smartphone for following news (The demographics 2012). Nearly 25 percent of 19-to-25-year-olds follows news on a social media platform (Digital 2013).

As college-aged adults increasingly embrace social networks as the primary fountain of knowledge, perhaps then college newspapers should progress into this realm (The demographics 2012). Diffusion of innovations theory posits that individuals adapt to technology when the advantages of the new device offset those of the familiar device; the new device becomes increasingly more user friendly and produces real or observable results (Rogers 1995). Therefore, if college students aren't reading a print newspaper now, they most likely never will (Diddi and LaRose 2006).

The Transformation of The Blue Banner

Background

The University of North Carolina Asheville is a small liberal arts school in the mountains of western North Carolina with an approximate enrollment of 3,700 undergraduate students. The adviser for *The Blue Banner* is also a lecturer within the Department of Mass Communication. The department was formed in the early 1980s and, like many journalism programs, originated from within the Department of Language and Literature.

During the mid 1980s, *The Blue Banner* converted from a tabloid to a broadsheet format in an effort to counter the prevailing view of tabloids as the supermarket purveyors of sensational journalism.



Figure 1: *The Blue Banner*'s early roots began as a tabloid, and converted to a broadsheet in the mid-1980s.

The new, more “newsy” paper was well received among faculty as advancing the program’s devotion to student development and skill building. The campus administration was, and remains, a generous supporter of the publication with student fee money.

Two notable shifts ensued in the new millennium – a new faculty adviser and Web 2.0. The new adviser was adept in newsroom practices and an award-winning newspaper designer and editor, while the previous adviser’s roots were steeped in scholarship and the conceptual underpinnings of media.

Web 2.0 facilitated the rise of multimedia journalism that eventually superseded print. Traditionally print journalism had been favored over visuals; visuals were perceived as a technical skill set rather than as a primary mode of communication (Abraham, 2002). Internet-based news sites required news staff possessing technical computer skills in order to incorporate the integral components of digital journalism – immediacy, interactivity, and multimedia (Harper 1996).

Tabloid versus broadsheet

Keeping with the broadsheet format while improving the overall design of The Blue Banner increased readership for a while.



Figure 2: The Blue Banner's last years as a broadsheet, 2007 and 2008.

As experienced by print media nationwide, readership and advertisers continued to dwindle in The Blue Banner as consumers increasingly moved online for their news, as evidenced by increased web traffic and social media followers. In 2009, the staff reverted to the tabloid format in hopes of boosting readership. Using Garcia's "Impact of the Compact" (2005) as an impetus, student editors used the layout and design class to design a prototype tabloid paper. Nearly two decades later, the stigma of a tabloid format no longer remained. Garcia's research shows tabloids — or compacts — are favored by younger readers, tend to be more successful when distributed for free, and have a more appealing and personal content. Garcia's (2005) findings meshed perfectly with The Blue Banner's college audience – smaller and livelier content equated to increased readership for The Blue Banner.

The print run increased from 1,500 papers to 2,000 with fewer returns from the racks piling up in the student publication's office. While the staff recorded no hard data, they noted fewer leftover issues. The problem of reader apathy seemed temporarily under control, but not for long. Readership of college newspapers is seemingly sporadic (Collins and Armstrong 2008).

Web 2.0, social media, and smartphones

During the mid 2000s, The Blue Banner staff implemented a companion website to its print edition with the online version updated after the paper went to press. Requiring computer skills not taught in the department, the site often went neglected – like many newspaper sites – as only a promotional item for the print product.



Figure 3: During the spring 2009 semester, The Blue Banner reverted to the tabloid format.

Meanwhile, Facebook, a social network created by Harvard undergraduate Mark Zuckerberg, began to attract college students across the nation. By 2006, Facebook was mainstream, and by 2009 the smartphone had taken social networking mobile. At the start of the new decade, more people visited Facebook than the most popular search engine, Google (Dougherty 2010). Within mass communication classes, the adviser asked students if they read the print edition or the online edition of the student newspaper. The majority of students reported reading The Blue Banner online.

The college newspaper, historically a diversion for students to read between classes, seemed doomed by advancing technology and changing reader habits. Even the mass communication students who produced The Blue Banner admitted they didn't read the paper; they only glanced to see if their content made it through the editing process. Rare efforts by enthusiastic students produced the occasional audio interview posted on the newspaper's website, or a social network status post or tweet, but this was just an aside to the weekly goal of putting out a print product. The student newspaper, left unappreciated in the lobby rack, needed a profound transformation.

Transforming The Blue Banner, one more time

In late 2009, the student newspaper joined the Asheville Citizen-Times as a participant in the Western North Carolina Local Information Cooperative (WNC LINC). The Citizen-Times, a Gannett-owned newspaper, received a grant to join the Networked Journalism Project sponsored by American University's J-Lab Institute and funded by the Knight Foundation. The project intended to partner a select number of community news and information websites

across the region. The goals of this one-year, grant-funded project were to develop a collaborative model to offer news and information to western North Carolina’s varied readers, increase web traffic and engagement among readers for network partners, and explore how the collaboration could be expanded and/or sustained over time.

The group also included websites by local people on varied community interests including a historic neighborhood association, local merchants group, a parenting website and a trio of college newspapers from the area. From its website, the Citizen-Times carried links to The Blue Banner and often ran the students’ articles with the local news headlines. The partnership resulted in more web traffic and a more diverse audience for The Blue Banner. Unfortunately the web traffic data were lost when the newspaper staff changed website providers.



Figure 4: The Blue Banner website traffic increased in both fall 2010 and spring 2011 as a result of the Western North Carolina Local Information Cooperative.

In exchange, The Blue Banner’s website shared an RSS widget that updated headlines from the WNC LINC partners: The Artful Parent, Ask Asheville, The Montford Neighborhood Association, The Tuckasegee Reader and college newspapers from Western Carolina University, Mars Hill College and Appalachian State University. This helped drive readers from one site to another. The Blue Banner staff viewed the project as a success since it raised the profile of the student newspaper from just a newsletter about the university to a truly independent voice of the community, covering varied issues of interest for both college students and Asheville-area residents.

New media, new methods

The partnership with the Western North Carolina Local Information Cooperative revealed the changes taking place in the newspaper industry. Some of these changes seem shocking: Reporters immediately post stories, photos and video directly to the newspaper’s website and social media platforms – and consequently to the public – without prior review by a series of

copy editors or other managerial oversight. Rapid response, immediate reader gratification and the word-of-mouth attributes of social media were undeniably necessary for any newspaper's survival. Editing occurred on the fly – fixing errors, updating information, adding photos and video as they become available. Through social media, journalists are maintaining their role in the agenda setting process (McCombs and Shaw 1972) as well as strengthening the concept of uses and gratifications (Katz 1974).

College newspapers must continue to adapt because the success of student reporters in the job market depends upon their ability to adapt a variety of skills for a variety of platforms (Fonteno 2009; Hubbard 2011). In the spring semester of 2011, UNC Asheville's Department of Mass Communication's faculty revamped its curriculum to stress student-learning outcomes

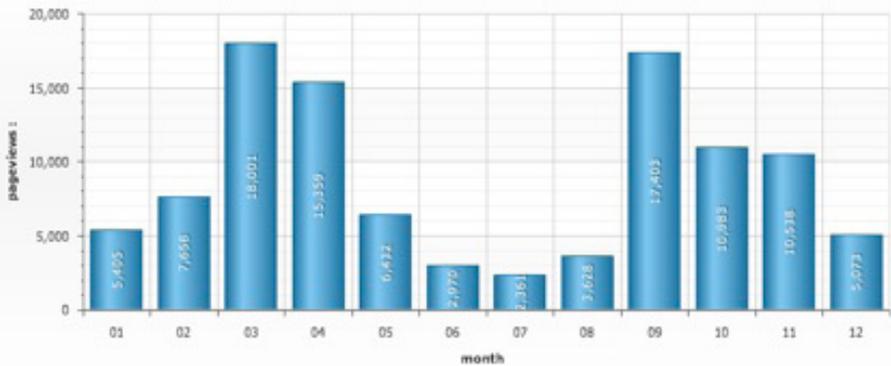


Figure 5: 2010 page views for The Blue Banner online edition trumped the popularity of the printed tabloid.

(SLOs) and updated course offerings. The department's SLOs guide course content and syllabi by focusing on areas of student learning such as critical thinking, engaging in lifelong learning, community outreach and mastery of theoretical, legal and practical underpinnings of mass communication.

In light of these goals, the department undertook a rededication to the core mission of the student newspaper – providing objective, credible and newsworthy information to the student body, the faculty and staff and the wider university community — regardless of traditional formats. Instead of treating social networks as a mere pastime or entertainment, the staff purposefully shared links to the online articles of The Blue Banner on their personal Facebook and Twitter accounts. The social network's wallposts attracted new readers to the college newspaper. Alumni could see links to articles shared by their former professors and classmates. Undergraduates and faculty now read stories online, and Facebook's "like" function opened the door to a larger network of friends. This culminated into a boost in traffic to The Blue Banner's website.

In the year before launching the social media campaign, the website consistently registered a significantly higher number of page views than the number of printed editions of the paper. For the Spring 2010 semester, The Blue Banner website had 52,855 page views, but only 24,000 printed copies (2,000 issues per run x 12 weeks) circulated on campus. For Fall 2010, the page views were 47,625. Even during the summer months, when The Blue Banner was

inactive, the website drew 6,331 hits. Of course, these numbers don't represent individual readers. Editors and others checking on the upload of material account for some of these page views. However, allowing for 100 hits by staff members during the four months of the semester or approximately 12,000 hits, this leaves 40,000 page views by readers now connected to our small liberal arts university.

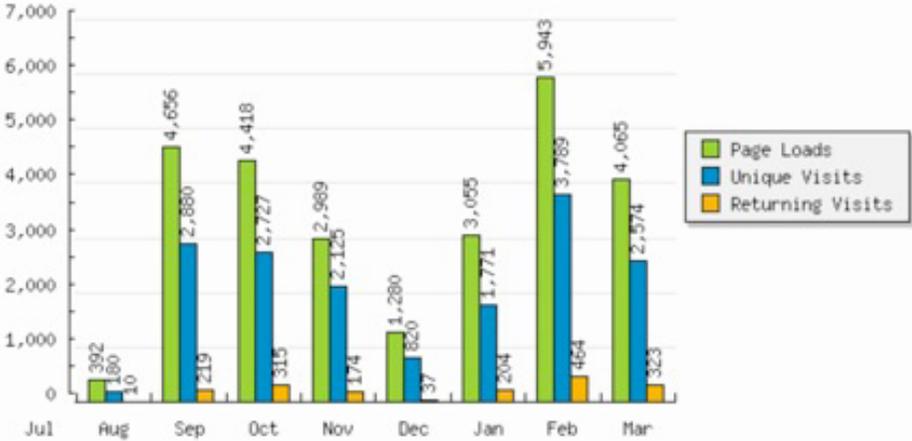


Figure 6: Unique page visits and page loads for The Blue Banner from August 2012 through March 2013.

The Blue Banner changed website providers for the fall of 2012. A new design and new analytics provided a glimpse into online readership trends. From August 2012 to March 2013, the paper's webpage had 16,866 unique visits and 26,798 total page loads. The unique visitors represent more than double the total monthly printed copies of the newspaper. Given that the editors typically report an average of about half of the papers return unread, this is strong evidence that online readers are the paper's biggest audience.

The Blue Banner's Facebook page has 501 "likes" as of March 2013. The numbers from this social media page reveal some demographic details. As expected, the average Facebook visitor is college aged. Followers are mostly female (63.7%), which is not out of line with the university's student body (56% female).

The reach of the Facebook page, how many views directly on the Facebook "wall," peaked in early March 2013 at nearly 3,000 but slumped due largely to fewer status posts by the student editors.

More to come

The Pew Center's The State of the News Media 2013 revealed 39 percent of survey respondents followed news online or from a mobile device. The adoption of tablet computers by adults increased to 31 percent – nearly four times the rate of adoption reported in 2011. Increasingly, tablet and smartphone users access news on these devices daily. In addition to increased use of mobile devices for following the news, almost 25 percent of 18-to-25-year-olds received their news from family and friends through social media platforms. No longer is media consumption and production relegated to the home or office; no longer is a newspaper the primary means for following local news. Finally, the study found that adults who consume local news via tablet or smartphones are disproportionately young, affluent, highly educated

and reside in non-rural communities. These characteristics are similar to the population of a college environment.

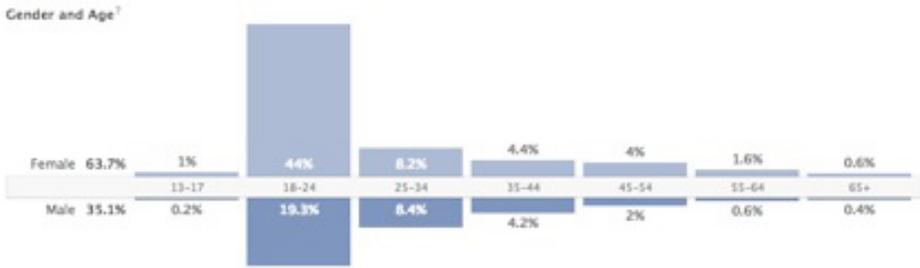


Figure 7: The gender and age of The Blue Banner’s online readers closely parallels the demographics of the university’s student body.

To address these changes, the staff of The Blue Banner were encouraged to view the printed newspaper as more of a promotional product to drive readers to the website. In addition, the staff needed to refocus their advertising efforts to online. Historically, print advertising revenue had exceeded online advertising revenue, but this was no longer the norm. Advertisers wanted the visibility social media offered. While advertising revenue is not the primary funding model for The Blue Banner, it is still necessary given that university funding remains unchanged since 2001.

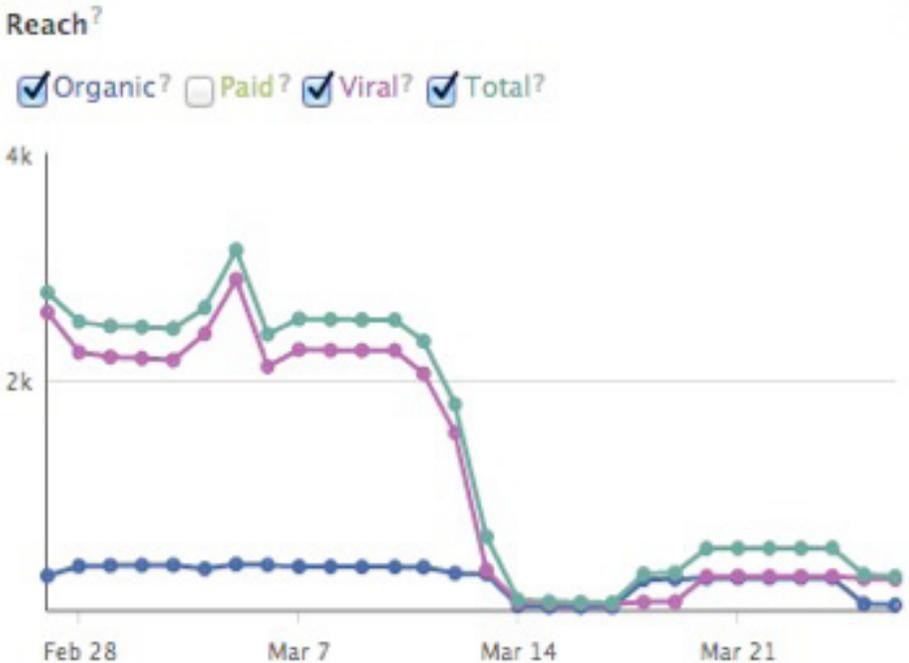


Figure 8: The Blue Banner’s reach on Facebook. The organic numbers denote the views directly on the newspaper’s page. The viral numbers are the views generated from shares.

For the 2011-2012 academic year, The Blue Banner struggled with technical difficulties – advertising revenue, staff changes – particularly the change in webmaster, a new Internet service provider, and implementation of Quick Response (QR) codes. For a college student QR codes may be the key to connecting with The Blue Banner online. As the 2012-2013 academic year is underway, the newspaper's reach grows online with 627 followers on Twitter and 439 likes on Facebook. Clearly, more redesign is on the horizon.

The Blue Banner has experienced tremendous transformations in a relatively short amount of time. The college tabloid newspaper has become a visual showpiece, providing compelling images, interesting headlines, and attractive layouts to entice a casual passerby to retrieve it from the rack.

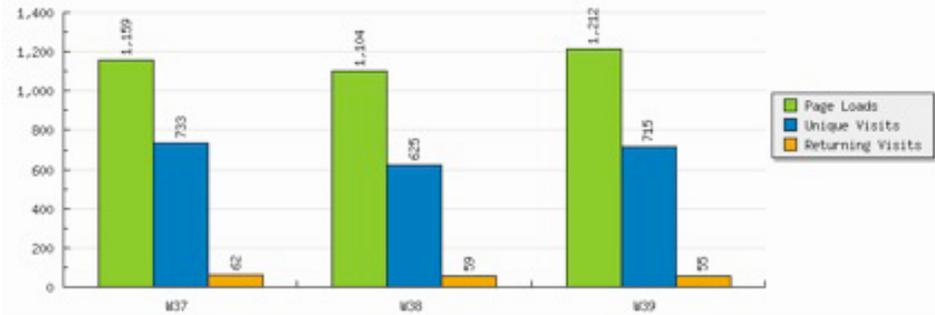


Figure 9: Weekly page loads, unique visits, and return visits for The Blue Banner for September 2012.

Discussion

This paper describes how the advisor and the staff of The Blue Banner continue to adapt to the changing newspaper landscape. Many factors influence readership on a college campus and therefore each advisor and staff will need to tailor how they choose to utilize social media platforms based upon the needs of their readership.

Should print go away?

Inevitably people ask about the future of the newspaper. The answer for mainstream corporate-owned newspapers is much more complex than for a small, liberal arts college newspaper. As McLuhan noted, “Media are often put out before they are thought out” (as cited in Thorburn and Jenkins 2003, p.4). Technological advancements may drive competition, but endangered technology becomes more highly valued (Thorburn and Jenkins 2003). Television didn’t eradicate radio; we just don’t tune in for fictional dramas or adventure serials anymore. Delivery technologies change, but old media and emerging media still coexist (Jenkins 2006). The printed college newspaper still has its place.

The Silos

Advisers who assist their newspaper staff in adapting to how we access the news by finding ways to coexist with and complement social media may be better prepared for the job market (Fonteno 2009; Hubbard 2011). The 2013 State of the Media report finds adults increasingly shifting to tablet computers and web-enabled smartphones to follow news. The technology changes may be easier to accomplish than the changing of minds. Academia, much like the newspaper industry, stands on tradition and a centuries-old sense of apprenticeship. Therefore, the most substantial barrier to adopting a multiplatform approach to the college newspaper

may be in the classroom (Artwick 2002). Often referred to as “silos” in academia, areas of mass communication tend to be taught independently from one another – print, broadcast, public relations, and advertising. A print journalist today must also understand the broadcast component of a news story in order to produce a short webcast on a tight deadline to accompany the online and print content. Content is king. Pierce and Miller (2007) found computer skills and online writing have risen in level of importance among a survey of U.S. newspaper editors, particularly more so for larger newspapers.

Some other barriers to teaching journalism are inherent within the technology. Traditionally, journalists work in large teams, but digital technology tends to “individualize the process of production” requiring a need for reflection, deliberation and dialogue (Buckingham, Harvey and Sefton-Green 1999, p. 16). Newsrooms function as a group, and a news staff learns through osmosis; an established newsroom influences the behavior of new, younger staff (Breed 1955; Reinardy 2010). Nonetheless, the adoption of cross-platform reporting doesn’t appear to have eroded the ability of students to develop specialized skills and critical thinking through conflict resolution.

The path behind us may offer little help in navigating the one ahead in this new world of rapid response where word-of-mouth is paramount. One goal within our Department of Mass Communication is to erode the invisible barriers between the areas of concentration: journalism, public relations, advertising and video production. These concentrations coexist within the profession even though curriculums often divide them into organized tracks. Instead of showing up to write a story for *The Blue Banner*, student reporters will find themselves capturing and editing stories TV-news style, creating a longer, thematic pieces or simply capturing interesting bits of visual campus life.

Directions for future research

Students continue to favor the group dynamic of the college newsroom. And although they are digital natives, they do not instinctively think of the strategic uses of social media. Video clips, tweets, posts, pins and podcasts of interviews have become part of the basic journalism skill set.

Schudson (2000) posited that the academy should focus more on the consequences of technology transformation of news production. Cary (2009) recognized the need to assess the ramification on the academy as the preference for online communication increases. A review of the literature suggests both are needed when exploring what mediates the student journalists’ adoption of the latest technology and the latest platforms, into the college newsroom.

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