

# The survival of student journalism: exploring new models for sustainability

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**The strength of a democracy is often said to be inextricably linked with the strength of its free press. Yet recent news reports suggest that the future of the student journalism in the United States is in jeopardy. In May 2013, *The New York Times* found that only 1 in 8 New York public high schools had a student newspaper (Hu 2013).**

A month later, *National Public Radio* aired a report titled “High School Newspapers: An Endangered Species” (Simon 2013).

This downward turn in student journalism could influence the future of the mainstream press. Ellen Austin, Dow Jones Journalism Educator of the Year (2012) says, “Fifty percent of future journalists start in high school and seventy-five percent of minority journalists start in high school” (Interview 2011). Changes at the scholastic level are reflected by a sharp decline in professional journalism jobs. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 13% decrease in journalism positions for the reporting period between 2012 and 2022, resulting in 7,200 fewer jobs (Occupational Outlook 2012).

These troubling trends don’t fully account for industry movement from print to online publishing. However, they suggest a bleak future for the journalism profession as a whole—one that could potentially threaten its watchdog function in democracy.

Journalism’s crisis is largely tied to economics. Writer Stuart Brand is attributed with the slogan “information wants to be free” (Wagner 2003), noting that consumers are now accustomed to having free and instant access to news created by legacy media and then aggregated by Google and through social media. But first-rate reporting still comes at a cost.

The problems plaguing student journalism are akin to the challenges confronting mainstream journalism. Faced with budget shortfalls and strained resources, many school administrators face tough choices about where to make cuts. Scholastic journalism in the U.S., when offered in secondary education, often exists as an elective that does not count towards graduation or as an underfunded after school program. Administrators who are not transparent leaders may welcome an opportunity to cut student publications, given their watchdog function. The press has a mandate: to examine questionable policies and expose misdeeds.

To fulfill journalism’s purpose, present and future practitioners must answer a vital question: How can journalism cover costs, remain sustainable, and potentially thrive in a climate where audiences of all ages are consuming more media but are less willing to pay for it?

Spreading awareness and fostering knowledge about vital issues is a primary function of a free press. Self-governing works when citizens are civically engaged and make informed choices based on accurate information. However, the public needs to be equipped with the necessary skills to interpret news. In a word, they benefit from having a foundation of *literacy*.

*News literacy* is viewed as a sub-discipline of media literacy, looking primarily at news content as a resource for teaching critical thinking and media analysis skills (Mihailidis 2102). Student publications (including newspapers, digital publications, and broadcasts)

provide young people with opportunities to apply news literacy skills through journalistic practice (Loth 2012). However, most of that practice centers on reporting, editing, and multimedia production—with little or no emphasis on business.

A survey of news literacy online teaching resources reveals limited materials on media business. The Journalism Education Association’s online curriculum has a module on social media and entrepreneurship. However, the approach centers on reading cases studies rather than experiential fieldwork (JEA 2015). The American Press Institute’s 213 page *Introductory News Literacy* guide advises teachers to have students sell ads, but makes no mention of social media. Nor does it discuss evolving trends related to sponsored content (API, 2012), which Andrew Sullivan and other noted critics argue is damaging editorial integrity (Braiker, 2014). Stony Brook University’s Center for News Literacy online resources mentions social media, but only in the context of newsgathering and consumption (Center for News Literacy 2015).

In this article, I argue for a more robust approach to teaching *business literacy*, beyond what is presently offered within the news literacy movement, and more broadly within journalism education. I reference the award-winning Palo Alto High School media arts program in Northern California, which I studied through extensive fieldwork between 2010 and 2013. Twelve visits were made for three to four consecutive days at a time, and students were followed into the field. I continue to track the evolution of the program, visiting once or twice a year.

The Palo Alto High School program is answering this call by placing emphasis on teaching entrepreneurial skills. Additionally, I discuss an after school experiment in Oregon. It brings students from several high schools together to the university’s journalism school to create a citywide magazine in partnership with the town’s local newspaper.

An appropriate lens for looking at these journalism programs is *Self-determination Theory* (Deci and Ryan 1985, 2000). Drawing a comparison from biology, it posits that human organisms have basic psychological needs that sustain their ability to lead healthy and productive lives. The theorists identify distinctions between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivations are internally based and are linked to authentic interests, as opposed to extrinsic motivations which are tied to some external driver, i.e. financial compensation, social status, getting good grades, or parental praise. They further assert that a continuum exists, in which one can experience high levels of intrinsic motivation or lower levels of extrinsic motivation, with amotivation (a sense of helplessness) at the lowest level.

The theorists identify three components that catalyze intrinsic motivation: *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness*. Autonomy refers to one’s sense that his or her actions are self-directed; competence refers to one’s sense that he or she is capable of attending to the task at hand; and relatedness refers to one’s sense of communal belongingness and support. I’ll explore how each of these components can inform the process of injecting *business literacy* lessons into news and media literacy curricula.

A first step in framing this discussion is to raise some overarching questions that speak to the topic’s relevance. These questions relate to significant societal consequences. Is it possible there is a correlation between our failure to teach journalism students and practitioners business literacy skills and the financial troubles that now plague many mainstream news organizations? Might a more financially literate press corps have asked tougher questions in the lead up to the 2008 financial meltdown, and previous economic crises? Would a more informed press have done a better job of forewarning the public that banks were over-leveraging their assets and making questionable loans?

There is no way to know for sure; however, these questions warrant further examination of the profession’s historical aversion to engaging with matters of business. Journalists

have long joked about being bad at math. A recent Poynter article on dual journalism career couples was entitled “The Best, and the Worst, of Having a Journalist for a Valentine: No One Can Do Math” (Hare 2014). The profession’s discomfort with matters of finance has a storied past.

The earliest American newspapers were one-person operations where publishers reported, wrote, edited, sold ads, and made deliveries. Subscription revenue was insufficient, and advertisers were notoriously slow to pay (Lyon 1965). To stay afloat, publishers often sought loans and donations. Financial backers sought to influence content, which threatened editorial integrity (Hamilton 1936).

“The Wall” is an industry term used to describe the historical practice that later evolved to separate news editorial and advertising departments. *Chicago Tribune* founder Col. Robert McCormick famously installed separate elevators for news staff and sales staff, and forbade communication between the two (Merritt 2005). The intention was honorable. Credibility is the currency that news media organizations live by, and publishers sought to maintain the integrity of their news operations.

Many news organizations now realize the imprudence of employing reporters who lack a fundamental understanding of their role in the sustainability of the enterprise. In this era of sponsored content and native advertising, the ethical boundaries can become blurred. Yet these boundaries are essential to the profession’s integrity, credibility, and therefore its longevity. These new and daring business practices will inform the evolution of the profession, and establish new guideposts for the next generation of journalists.

There is general consensus that in journalism, sales should not drive editorial decision-making. However, it is no longer sensible to be dismissive of sales and marketing, or refer to these legitimate disciplines as “the dark side” (Culver 2014). In a 146-page published report, the Columbia School of Journalism found that most reporters don’t understand their business (Bazilian 2011). A relatively recent *Forbes* article headline said it best, “Journalists Need to Understand the Ad Business, Not Sulk and Go Home” (DVorkin 2012).

Yet the notion that marketing—and more specifically sales—are shameful practices has cultural currency, particularly among millennials. In a study of students beginning a Principles of Marketing class, almost half believed that marketing was a “bad business practice,” and nearly a fourth thought it was a poor career choice (Ferrell and Gonzales 2004). Yet, at its core, marketing is a well-established strategic method for creating awareness with its own set of profession ethics and guidelines (AMA 2013), and one of its key components is sales.

At Palo Alto High School, Esther Wojcicki and her colleagues teach students the importance of how business supports journalism by having them sell advertising. Nearly 80% of the \$3,000 cost of printing an issue of *Campanile*, the school’s newspaper, is covered by local advertising sold by students. Wojcicki stated:

“Everyone sells ads. It’s one of the most important things they can learn, because it is a fundamental of our capitalist system. But it’s hard for them, because they are apprehensive about talking to strangers.” (Interview 2015)

The Palo Alto High School journalism program has come a long way. When Wojcicki took the helm in 1984, only 19 students were participating. Now more than 500 of its 1,800 students are engaged in journalism and media arts, producing nine different publications. They include a newspaper, a news website, three feature magazines, a sports magazine, a yearbook, and a daily three-camera newscast—all led by students. The program consistently wins top honors in the Columbia Scholastic Press Awards (CSPAs), and President Barack Obama has acknowledged its excellence.

It would be easy to dismiss the success of the program as solely attributable to privilege. Situated directly across from Stanford University, and in close proximity to Facebook and Google’s headquarters, Palo Alto High School is located in one of the wealthiest communities in the United States. However, a broader quantitative study of 664 English language arts (ELA) students at 10 U.S. high schools (including Palo Alto High) indicated that its journalism program’s results are potentially attainable in communities of diverse socioeconomic circumstances with students of diverse ethnicities, when controlling for school and student demographics (community type, class-standing, or socioeconomic status). Students taught journalistic strategies in less affluent communities reported motivational beliefs and learning strategies that were similar to students in affluent communities, which challenges the presumption that Palo Alto High’s results are an anomaly. In the study, ELA students who used journalism strategies also reported significantly higher levels of personal growth and sense of self than ELA students not exposed to journalism strategies. (Madison 2012, 2015).

Wojcicki and her team’s pedagogical practices exemplify the principles of Self-determination Theory. Each publication has a student-elected team of editors who fully manage day-to-day operations, including decisions about equipment purchases that are typically handled by teachers and administrators.

I witnessed an exchange between an instructor and a student who suggested that the program should invest in a particular model of video camera. Rather than issue a verdict, the instructor asked her to research it further and make a formal pitch to the student editorial team. She did, and her proposal was accepted.

Empowering students to advocate for their convictions fosters *autonomy*, critical thinking, and teaches invaluable business skills. It teaches students that their voices matter, and that their futures can be self-determined. Additionally, when students are encouraged to step outside of their comfort zones and to take risks, it bolsters *competency*.

To prepare their students to close sales, Wojcicki and her team engage them in paired role-play exercises. “Learning to provide a service [like advertising] and be paid for it is an invaluable lesson” Wojcicki stated. Support from teachers and peers touches on Self-determination Theory’s third principle, *relatedness*. When students work in teams, and are mentored by peers and teachers, they feel supported and safe to experiment. The bond created with their community further exemplifies the principle. Local businesses value having an opportunity to support students and learning. Additionally, Wojcicki reports that once her students realize that their audience extends beyond teachers, peers, and their immediate family, they bring a higher level of commitment to their journalism assignments.

The program also engages students in critical examination of evolving trends in funding journalism. In 2015, “InFocus,” the students’ newscast, experimented with producing an advertorial about a make-up and hair artist prior to their prom with minimal controversy. However, the response was different when “PalyVoice,” their online publication, received a request from a local business to write about it in exchange for payment that was to be labeled “sponsored.” Student staffers engaged in a vigorous debate about how to reply. “It didn’t take long for the distaste to emerge in the general discussion and it became apparent that the students weren’t going to go there, said Paul Kandell, the publication’s faculty adviser. “Their credibility is important to them -- thank goodness -- and I’m happy to let them exercise critical thinking about their values in our sheltered high school world” (Interview 2016).

Kandell added:

“To be sure, many of them will likely encounter situations in the future when they won’t have as much freedom and are just expected to do what it takes to maximize profit. Where

else will they get the chance to be idealists or to work in a world where integrity is everything -- and to explore those ideas with peers who can reinforce their value? (Interview 2016)."

Cynics might suggest that Palo Alto has a tax base that allows businesses to engage in higher levels of discretionary spending, such as buying ads in student publications. And yes, there is no denying that Palo Alto is a very wealthy community. However, such an assertion negates the fact that businesses everywhere promote their services by some means. Such a contention would also imply that less affluent youth are somehow less valuable as a target market for businesses. I would argue that students who face socioeconomic challenges have as much if not more to gain from practicing these skills. Some are less likely to have role models who can demonstrate business principles. Learning to advocate for oneself and to negotiate financial transactions can be transformative.

Many high schools are without a news literacy or journalism program that can support students in learning these skills. At the University of Oregon, we facilitate journalism after school programs and summer camps that draw students from a mix of high schools, some of which have floundering journalism programs. The result is *Cascadia Magazine*, produced quarterly by the students and supported in part by local businesses through advertising. While initial focus has been on creating and curating content, we also engage students in critical discussions about sustainable solutions for funding journalism. *Cascadia Magazine's* value to advertisers is enhanced by an agreement with the *Register-Guard*, the citywide newspaper, which inserts it in Sunday editions. It's a model that shows promise, and that can be replicated by other journalism schools.

The high school students receive training in journalism practices, and gain an understanding of emerging business models. In terms of additional benefits, high school students, who may not have family members who attended college, receive mentorship from university students. In turn, our university students experience the rewards of giving back. These are just two examples of programs where business practices are being injected into journalism education.

Recognizing the value of teaching these skills, the Scripps Foundation funds a weeklong Journalism Entrepreneurship Institute, which convenes each winter at Arizona State University's Cronkite School. Selected fellows promise to use the strategies learned to infuse business skills into their own college-level journalism curricula. Following my participation as a member of the program's first cohort in 2012, I established our school of journalism's first media entrepreneurship course. Now in its fourth year, the class challenges students to develop original media products and services. During the final session they pitch their business concepts to a panel of professionals. Several of the ideas have spawned viable projects.

Business literacy not only complements news and media literacy, it is essential for the sustainability of the profession.

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# Reviews

The reviews pages are edited by Tor Clark. If you have a book you would like to review or have come across a new book we should know about please get in touch. Also if you have recently had a book published and would like to see it reviewed, please contact Tor on [tclark@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:tclark@dmu.ac.uk)

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**Journalism and Politics provides a theme to the latest Reviews section. Professor Ivor Gaber, a well-known figure at AJE gatherings, offers a fascinating and topical insight into Stephen Cushion's investigation of the changes which have taken place in TV politics, shedding light on how the format has developed and its implication for the practice of political journalism and audience engagement.**

As the 2016 American presidential election gathers pace, Richard Jones offers a timely look back at a classic episode which changed political journalism forever in Matt Bai's account of how Gary Hart's quest for the Democratic nomination for the US presidency in the 1980s ended up focusing more on the personal than the political.

The serious issues around media plurality and democracy, which of course centre around political journalism, are examined in Steven Barnett and Judith Townend's new edited collection, which offers a useful and timely new resource in an under-researched area for Journalism courses.

Meanwhile prolific book editor and regular JE reviewer John Mair delves into the fascinating career of former top BBC executive Roger Mosey, which progressed from local radio to BBC editorial supremo, via the Today programme and the London Olympics coverage, with some politics thrown in for good measure.

For those of you needing some comic relief from all the politics, Michael Foley comes to your rescue, recommending Michael Frayn's journalism novel, *Towards the End of the Morning*, set in the Fleet Street of almost half a century ago, to offer a little context, and not a few laughs, to Journalism students and their tutors alike.

The Reviews section is, as ever, grateful to its small but enthusiastic band of reviewers and invites all JE readers to suggest books about Journalism for review, or better still offer to review relevant works themselves. As ever, all and any offers will be gratefully received at [tclark@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:tclark@dmu.ac.uk)

**Tor Clark, Reviews Editor**