



News, Improved

How America's Newsrooms Are Learning to Change

www.newsimproved.org

INTRODUCTION

“NEWS, IMPROVED” is for journalists who intend to thrive in the 21st Century.

It is an exploration of the new world right in front of us, a manual for those ready to stop pining for the past and start growing with the future. The message: Any journalist can learn to join the booming digital world of targeted, convenient, interactive media.

The digital revolution has, plain and simple, upended journalism. The speed at which information moves -- and the new ways people consume it -- is transforming what journalists need to know and do.

News, Improved describes how newsrooms can remake themselves. It highlights newspaper leaders who are taking charge of change. It visits newsrooms big and small that move as more creative teams, coordinated yet still independent thinkers. It tells of journalists who stay true to their best, most time-honored values as they innovate and become more open, closer even, to their audiences.

The key to all the above is strategic training.

This book sees hope even for daily newspapers, the media life form most endangered today. It focuses on them because they operate America's most important news collection system. Employing nearly half the country's 120,000 general news journalists, the dailies provide citizens with the much of the news they use to run their governments and their lives. As Jack Knight wrote, good newspapers are what “bestir the people into an awareness of their own condition, provide inspiration for their thoughts and rouse them to pursue their true interests.”

Some say such journalism is impossible in the digital age. At Knight Foundation, we disagree. We think the future of news is everyone's to make or break.

THE 21ST CENTURY IS BRINGING big changes to journalism. The one-way model of news -- a journalist sends a message through a medium to an audience -- is evolving. To survive, news people are reinventing each of the four elements in the model -- the journalist, the message, the medium, the audience.

First, journalists are changing themselves. Newsrooms, once the refuge of quirky geniuses and raging individualists, now need people who can work well together. Newsroom culture can still be probing, exacting, compulsively curious and even quirky, but at the same time, it must be open, diverse, tolerant and collaborative.



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Second, journalists are changing the form and nature of their message. When interactive maps are better than police logs, they need to provide the maps. Journalists need to tap their own creativity, creating a steady stream of innovative products that put the news into greater, more meaningful context.

Third, journalists are changing their medium -- to multimedia. Get the news once, then deliver it on the web, the phone, the radio and the television as well as in the paper. The best journalists are finding ways to create tools and techniques to do it.

The fourth change: Audience. They are no longer simply viewers, readers or users. They are now news producers. Journalists need to find ways to engage and enlist their audiences in the fair, accurate contextual search for truth.

Journalist, message, medium, audience. Changing all at once seems too much. But it is being done in places like Hamilton, Ontario, and Bakersfield, California, and it can be done anywhere. The catch: Doing things differently requires new and different skills. Transformation requires news organizations to find ways to spend more time, and even more money, on professional development. Today, it's more important for everyone to know what they are doing than it is to have one more staff member running around after one more story.

To demonstrate this, the Knight Foundation spent \$10 million during the past four years on something we called the Newsroom Training Initiative.

News, Improved explains what our grantees accomplished. The **Tomorrow's Workforce** program convinced CEOs to let us work with willing newspaper editors to shape training programs that would move entire newsrooms. **The Learning Newsroom** demonstrated that news culture can be better when it's more constructive. **NewsTrain** showed how middle managers, the guardians of culture, can become advocates of good training when they get a little of it themselves. **The Traveling Curriculum** showed that newsrooms can raise standards and help each other meet them. **News University** showed that any journalist could get better just by going on line.

The Newsroom Training Initiative reached, conservatively, 30,000 journalists. Our message, that training works, was convincing enough for newspaper companies that belong to the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association to donate \$8 million to a permanent endowment to bring basic training to their employees in a program called the Traveling Campus. This was a major shift for an industry that invests a pitiful .4 percent of payroll in training (by the latest Inland Press Association estimates) while the average American business invests more than five times that.

SNPA has made a good start. The \$100 billion a year news industry should not depend upon charity for the training of its own employees. But as our foundation's training initiative sunsets, we wonder: Will the industry step up? So far, the answer is yes – and



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no. Our research shows that 3 in 10 news organizations are increasing training. New media and management training are high on the list of priorities. The glass is a third full.

If you are a good journalist, stuck at a news organization that doesn't seem to believe in its own future, what should you do? Leave? Yes, actually. If reasonable efforts – such as those described in this book – are not being tried, train yourself as best you can and go. The 20th century killed 1,000 daily newspaper newsrooms and 1,000 radio newsrooms. Media evolution doesn't favor the big or strong. It favors the nimble. Be nimble.

Profits are high enough to remake this industry. Web readership is soaring. Private companies are reinvesting. It's time for journalism training to grow up, from an ad hoc, budget-less, random act of kindness to a smart, professional way to help an entire newsroom get where it urgently needs to go.

We don't need another exposé of missed opportunities. What we need to do is explore the opportunity that's right in front of us. That's the goal of *News, Improved*.

With good leaders, clear goals, an open culture and a specific plan, journalists can change any news organization, even a daily newspaper. The courageous tell us total change is just a few years away. We hope to see you there.

-- Eric Newton

Eric Newton is vice president of journalism programs at Knight Foundation. He was founding managing editor of the Newseum; managing editor of the Oakland Tribune; editor of numerous books, including Crusaders, Scoundrels, Journalists; Capture the Moment, and News in a New America, and a four-time Pulitzer Prize juror.