Meta-journalism

For most of the twentieth century, newspapers were a relatively stable industry. Many operated essentially as local monopolies, so just standing pat they could make lots of money—e.g., a 20 to 30 percent profit margin from advertising sales and circulation, “even without having legendary business people in charge,” says Joshua Benton, director of the Nieman Journalism Lab. “Then the Internet came along and changed all that.” Since the 1990s, the entire news and journalism business has been in turmoil. Amid this chaos, in 2008, Benton launched the Lab, based at Harvard’s Nieman Foundation; it’s an online vehicle that’s “85 percent newsroom, 15 percent think tank,” he says. “We try to contribute to a discussion of how journalism is going to move through this disruption.”

Many have joined the conversation: last fall, the lab’s website (www.niemanlab.org) welcomed its five-millionth page-view. Visitors can learn how the St. Louis Beacon recently used a new Apple app, iBooks Author, to compile its articles, photographs, and video on 2011’s record floods into Meandering Mississippi, a new e-book. Or trace the way Mignon Fogarty, a science and technical writer, had an epiphany in a beachfront café in Santa Cruz, California, and parlayed her hobby—producing weekly Grammar Girl podcasts on usage and syntax—into a growing media network. They can access a detailed analysis of how Oslo-based Schibsted, the world’s eighth-largest news organization (just behind the New York Times Company), operates in 28 countries and extracts 36 percent of its revenue from digital sources—more than three times the rate of an average newspaper. The latter concludes a three-part series by Ken Doctor on European business models for the digital news industry, which in some ways are far ahead of those of North America.

“My idea was to run in the newsroom a website. I run an online news site about online news sites,” says Benton, though in truth, the lab also covers many stories on journalistic innovation: new developments in data visualization; emerging business prototypes; novel advertising formats; the growing role of mobile devices in both consuming and producing journalism; the impact of Twitter, Facebook, and the ways news gets shared online. “We try to focus on: ‘What innovations are we seeing?’” Benton says. “What are people trying, what is working, and what can we learn from it? It’s all aimed at trying to figure out a path forward for journalism.”

During the lab’s three-plus years, it has published more than 2,600 articles by more than 100 authors. It attracts more than 250,000 page views per month, and 75,000 follow the lab on Twitter. Its readership comes largely through referrals. “If you look at most large news sites, 50 to 60 percent of the traffic will start at their home page—someone typing, say, ‘nytimes.com’ into their browser,” Benton explains. “For us, the comparable number is less than 10 percent, because much more of our traffic comes from people sharing our stories on their blogs, or on Twitter, or through social media, or e-mailing them to colleagues, or whatever else. So we have a much larger share of people coming in through that ‘side door,’ as it’s sometimes called. That means, I think, that our readers, when they finish a story, say, ‘Hey, I want to share this with people I know.’ Which is heartening.”

The lab has a rare status: a news operation running within the University that is not devoted to Harvard news. Typically that happens at universities with journalism schools—which Harvard is not. But it does have the 75-year-old Nieman Foundation, which enables working journalists to take a fellowship year in academia. The Nieman endowment funds most of the lab’s budget; it has also received grants from the Knight Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation. Such support allows the lab to operate as a news site sans ads, meaning “We don’t have to artificially pump up page-view numbers to try to squeeze a little more money out of advertisers,” Benton says.

The lab germinated in the mind of former Nieman curator Bob Giles in 2006, when he began thinking that the foundation “needed to become a significant participant in the emerging conversation on the future of news. We were getting fellows who wanted to know what their future was.” The foundation’s advisory board agreed with that premise and, working with him, came up with the idea of a website.

The timing was good for Benton, who completed his own Nieman year in 2008. (He had been a reporter for the Dallas Morning News for several years before; in college at Yale, he was an early blogger and earned “pizza and beer” money designing websites.) Benton started work in July 2008 and had the site up and running by October. “In a very short time, Josh got...
authority people to write for it,” Giles recalls, “and made it the go-to site if you wanted to know about how serious journalism is evolving. The lab continues to get an enormous amount of recognition and attention—it’s widely respected. Josh is the perfect guy for this enterprise: he has great ideas, a deep understanding of the digital world, and he’s very well networked.”

Globally so: Benton also travels a good deal to get the word out, giving talks around the United States and in places like São Paulo, Berlin, Paris, and Hong Kong in recent years. The lab keeps in touch with cognate entities like the Shorenstein Center for the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School and MIT’s Center for Civic Media. It hosts monthly happy hours that bring together “the nerdiest elements” of Boston’s journalism community, says Benton, with a grin.

Three staff writers, plus many freelancers, do the lab’s reporting, posting new material five days a week; the day’s first tweet goes out around 9 a.m. Users also can access its aggregation project, Fuego (“fire” in Spanish), launched last year—a “heat-seeking Twitter bot.” Fuego algorithmically determines what part of the Twitter world is talking about the future of journalism, and tracks and ranks the stories that these people are discussing every 30 minutes.

Fuego is one way to cope with the waning gatekeeper function of editors, Benton explains, describing a world in which “the power to publish is no longer limited to people who have a broadcast tower or who buy ink by the barrel. While some may not like the cacophony of voices that can sometimes produce, I think it’s inarguable that this has enabled some very smart people to produce some very good work that they wouldn’t have been able to do in a pre-Internet world.”

The cyber-landscape also means that a YouTube video can go viral without any gatekeeper involved: Web users simply share it laterally. That’s true for information generally, he adds, so “People are sifting for editorial gold but don’t have time to do all the work” of winnowing through the tweets, blogs, and posts out there. Fuego attempts to cut through the noise to help those prospecting for knowledge.

The lab scrutinizes how newspapers and broadcast outlets are adapting to the changed environment, while also paying attention to the new generation of “online natives” with “different business models, and in many cases more sustainable business models,” Benton says. Such natives are news operations that began online, like ProPublica, the Pulitzer Prize-winning news site; other examples include political sites like Talking Points Memo and Politico—which has a print component but was online from the start.

Older companies are experiencing certain characteristic problems due to the digital world’s disruption of their monopolies on advertising and readers’ attention. “I don’t quite subscribe to this metaphor,” Benton says, “but some people compare it to the dinosaurs versus mammals: the dinosaurs were huge and powerful, but then they got disrupted. The next stage of evolution was lots of small, furry creatures who weren’t all that impressive scurrying around. Whatever the imagery, structural dislocation clearly prevails, and in Benton’s estimate, a theorist of business disruption, Cizik professor of business administration Clayton Christensen, is “probably the most influential thinker about business issues in this media world.” References to Christensen’s ideas frequently turn up in the lab’s reports; his biggest single impact on the media field was Newspaper Next, a report that the American Press Institute paid him and his consulting firm to produce in 2006.

For the practicing journalist, work is now harder in some ways and easier in others. “The ability to find that background information more quickly is a great boon,” says Benton, “but you’re probably going to have to tweet your story and share it on Facebook and take more responsibility for [its] marketing and promotion than you might have before. If someone asks you a question about your story on Twitter, you have the opportunity to respond and, depending on where you work, you might have the responsibility to respond. All that is amplified by the fact that a lot of these organizations are having financial difficulties, so there are fewer people to produce the product. And there are more products. It’s a stressful but invigorating time to be a journalist.”

THE UNDERGRADUATE

Looking Forward, Looking Back

by KATHERINE XUE ’13

I’ve had a lot of long conversations recently. Chance moments—lazy evenings or weekend mornings spent lingering in the dining hall; the common room late at night, with all my roommates joining in. Conversations about big things, like priorities and life plans, friends and relationships, work-family balance. Little things that turn into big things: Are you taking the GRE this spring? Where will you be this summer?

I’ve heard these conversations have come early. We’re only (only?) juniors. One year is a comfortable buffer before the end of college; my wall calendar can’t yet show my entrance into the real world. Still, Harvard students are nothing if not overachievers, and I’ve started to feel some premature separation anxiety. Away from the familiar structure of classes and extracurriculars, life seems bewilderingly open.