

Poynter's electronic university teaches journalism across the world

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Since its launch five years ago, the Poynter Institute's News University (www.newsu.org) has changed the way many journalists approach their jobs and how they train for them. With more than 148 000 registered users in more than 200 countries around the globe, News University is the premier online educational resource for journalists, educators, students and others who are interested in journalism skills.

Most important, NewsU's e-learning works. More than 60% of NewsU's users said the courses helped them get better on the job.

"I credit NewsU for helping me do my job better than I could on my own, giving me courage to try new things," says Sheila Hagar, a reporter for the Walla Walla (Washington) *Union Bulletin*. "I don't feel alone when I take a class."

To meet the continued demand around the world from those who are hungry for core training in journalism's craft and values, Poynter's News University has developed a new initiative to transform NewsU modules into other languages and cultures.

NewsU International, a project developed in partnership with the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ), is taking what Poynter has learned about effective e-learning and applying it to training worldwide. Among the first projects of this international initiative are transforming six modules into Persian and three modules into Russian.

This initiative is made possible by the redesign of the NewsU site, launched in January 2010. The new site enables the Poynter to continue to develop timely training in English, and, at the same time, offer training with relevant cultural examples in multiple languages. It may be a new site, but it's a familiar goal – relevant, accessible and engaging training.

The NewsU approach

In a time-crunched and cash-strapped world in which journalists are accepting more and more job responsibility, training is both much more necessary and simultaneously less of a priority for overstretched media outlets. NewsU, created by a grant from the John S and James L Knight Foundation, fills that void by offering courses designed to meet the limited time and financial resources of journalists, educators and others. NewsU designs its courses with specific goals in mind:

Control. NewsU users choose what course they want to take, when they want to take it, and where they take it. They can start and stop on their schedule, coming back as often as they like.

Time. Most NewsU courses are designed to be completed in one or two hours, and they all allow users to move through the information at their own pace.

Focus. NewsU modules provide specific training. Rather than a 16-week course about writing, NewsU courses focus on a targeted skill, such as interviewing or writing better leads.

Cost. NewsU courses are either free or inexpensive. Particularly in an age of shrinking budgets, NewsU's aim is to be as accessible to as many as possible.

Measuring NewsU's effectiveness

That kind of strategic approach to the needs of its audience has paid off. One measure of success is the dramatic growth in the number of users on the site to more than 148 000 in five years. Other statistics show the value of NewsU's training. Sixty-two percent of users say they're likely to use the course they've taken as a reference in the

future. Eighty-two percent say they'll return for another course.

But the true success of NewsU is how it's helping its participants become better journalists. Seventy percent say NewsU modules were useful to extremely useful to their work. Sixty-one percent said NewsU's courses helped them get better on the job.

"NewsU broke me out of my writing rut. Rather than becoming complacent, I began to labour over my stories so I could make them the best possible work under deadline," says Tasha Kates, a reporter for the *Daily Progress* in Charlottesville, Virginia. "A few months later, I got a better reporting job at a bigger newspaper."

John Bonner, a multimedia journalist for Toronto *Social Justice Magazine*, often works alone and doesn't have the opportunity to learn from others on an everyday basis. "With NewsU, I have access to a variety of mentors with different journalistic styles," he says.

Poynter's NewsU also serves as adjunct faculty across hundreds of universities across the world. For many educators, NewsU is a digital textbook that is current and interactive. Educators are using e-learning to supplement classroom instruction, and students are responding enthusiastically.

"NewsU is perfect for my traditional and adult students," says Audrey Wagstaff of Hiram College in Ohio. "It's visual, immediate and interactive. Obtaining and holding (students') attention is increasingly difficult, given the type of media their exposed to, but they actually like sitting down and taking a course with NewsU because it contains material they can mold and interact with."

Training beyond borders

The global reach of the Internet has made NewsU the place to go for journalism education worldwide. Antonietta Rico, a US Army journalist who served a tour of duty in Tikrit, Iraq, says that most of her learning as a journalist has been self-motivated and on the job. "I did not feel like I was properly capturing the essence of the soldiers and their stories in my articles," she said. Then she discovered NewsU. Not only did she enroll in a wide variety of courses, but she also assigned all journalists in her charge to do the same.

In Saudi Arabia, Arab News reporter/translator Hassn'a Moktar, points out that Saudi women cannot receive degrees in journalism within the country and that NewsU has helped her further her career: "I gained so much through the information each course provided," she said. "These were not only helpful courses that taught me so much about building stories, verifying facts and writing, but they were also free-of-charge."

By expanding its global outreach, NewsU can continue to help journalists such as Elias Bangura, a reporter in Sierra Leone, who had little experience in his field and used NewsU to further his career. "(NewsU) has my eternal gratefulness and appreciation," he says.

When Poynter's NewsU launched in 2005, the site had two major goals: The first was to serve as an e-learning portal that would take the best of training from across the journalism community and make it accessible using the Internet. The second goal was to learn more about e-learning and share that information across the industry. With a robust curriculum and a growing user base, NewsU has accomplished those goals.

Meeting those goals doesn't mean NewsU is finished. In an ever-changing world that doesn't allow much time or money for training, Poynter's News University delivers the training journalists and others need with an expanding range of technologies, formats, partners and languages.