If I ran a
journalism
school, I'd

shake
things
up

Paul Greenway

Paul Greenway

JOURNALISM EDUCATION, LIKE THE TRADE ITSELF, HAS MOVED TOO SLOWLY TO CHANGE WITH THE TIMES. YET, SAYS **DAN GILLMOR,** THERE ARE SIGNS OF PROGRESS, AND THE EDUCATORS, WHO USED TO LAG FAR BEHIND THE PRACTITIONERS IN KEY WAYS, ARE CATCHING UP AND EVEN MOVING AHEAD ON SEVERAL FRONTS

I am jealous of my students, and of all students who study journalism. They will be entering a work force that, yes, is full of uncertainty; they will not be likely to have the kind of career that I enjoyed in more than 20 years as a reporter, editor and columnist for major newspapers in America. But there has never been such an open field of opportunity – to create the next version of journalism and the business models that will pay for it – as exists today.

Journalism education, like the trade itself, has moved too slowly to change with the times. Yet there are signs of progress, and the educators, who used to lag far behind the practitioners in key ways, are catching up and even moving ahead on several fronts. If I ran a journalism school, I'd shake things up in a profound way that recognised the changes and the opportunities.

I would start with the basic principles of honorable, high-quality journalism , and embed them at the core of everything else. If our students didn't understand and appreciate them, nothing else we did would matter very much. With the principles as the foundation, I would, among many other things:

Emphasise undergraduate journalism degrees as great liberal arts programmes, even more valuable that way than as training for journalism careers. At the same time, focus graduate journalism studies on helping people with expertise in specific areas to be the best possible journalists in their fields.

Do away with the still-common "track" system for would-be journalists where students focus on print, broadcast, online, etc. These are merging. There would be one track. We wouldn't just recognise our students' digital future; we'd immerse them in it.

Keep what we now call public relations as part of the mission, but move it into a separate programme. Call it "Persuasion," and include marketing and other kinds of non-journalistic advocacy in this category. As we recognise that the lines are blurring, sometimes uncomfortably, we'll require all journalism students to learn the techniques of persuasion. But Persuasion majors would conversely be steeped in the principles of honourable media creation.

Encourage, and require in some cases, cross-disciplinary learning and doing. We'd create partnerships around the university, working with business, engineering/computer science, film, political science, law, design and many other programmes. The goals would be both to develop our own projects and to be an essential community-wide resource for the future of local media.

Teach students not just the basics of digital media but also the value of data and programming to their future work. This doesn't necessarily mean that they need to become programmers; but they absolutely need to know how to communicate with programmers. We'd also encourage computer science undergraduates to become journalism graduate students, so they can help create tomorrow's media.

Require all students to learn basic statistics, survey research and fundamental scientific methodology. The inability of journalists to understand what they're reading is one of journalism's – and society's – major flaws.

Encourage a research agenda with deep connections to key media issues of today. More than ever, we need solid data and rigorous analysis. And translate faculty research into language average people can understand as opposed to the dense, even impenetrable, prose that's clear (if it really is) only to readers of academic journals.

If I ran a journalism school, I'd shake things up…

Require all journalism students to understand business concepts, especially those relating to media. This is not just to cure the longstanding ignorance of business issues in the craft, but also to recognise that today's students will be among the people who develop tomorrow's journalism business models. We'd discuss for-profit and not-for-profit methods, and look at advertising, marketing, social networking, and search engine optimisation, among many other elements.

Promote entrepreneurship as a core element of the curriculum. I'll discuss this further below.

Appreciate our graduates no matter where their careers have taken them. If we understand that journalism education is a valuable step into any number of professions, we should not just celebrate the graduates who've gone on to fame (if not fortune) in journalism, but also those who've made marks in other fields.

Persuade the president (or chancellor or whatever the title) and trustees of the university that every student on the campus should learn journalism principles and skills before graduating, preferably during freshman year. At State University of New York's Stony Brook campus, the journalism school has been given a special mandate of exactly this kind. Howard Schneider, a former newspaper journalist who now is dean of Stony Brook's journalism school, won foundation funding to bring news literacy into the university's broader community, not just those enrolled in journalism courses.

Create a programme of the same kind for people in the community, starting with teachers. Our goal would be to help schools across our geographical area bring media activism to every level of education—not just college, but also grade, middle, and high school. We would offer workshops, conferences and online training.

Offer that programme, or one like it, to concerned parents who feel overwhelmed by the media deluge themselves, to help turn them into better media consumers and to give them ways to help their children.

Provide for-fee training to communicators who work in major local institutions, such as PR and marketing folks from private companies, governmental organisations, and others. If they could be persuaded that the principles matter, they might offer the public less BS and more reality, and we'd all be better off for the exercise.

Enlist another vital player in this effort: local media of all kinds, not just traditional media. Of course, as noted earlier, they should be making this a core part of their missions, given that their own credibility would rise if they helped people understand the principles and process of quality journalism. But we'd very much want to work with local new media organisations and individuals, too.

Advise and train citizen journalists to understand and apply the principles and best practices. They are going to be an essential part of the local journalism ecosystem, and we should reach out to show them how we can help.

Augment local media with our own journalism. We train students to do journalism, after all, and their work should be widely available in the community, particularly when it fills in gaps left by the shrinking traditional media. At Arizona State, the Cronkite News Service provides all kinds of coverage of topics the local news organisations rarely cover, making our students' work available to those organisations. Soon, we'll be publishing it ourselves on our own website.

Above all, I would try to prepare students for the reality that they may be inventing their own jobs – because they must, in some cases, but also because doing so will be challenging, fun and, for many, enormously satisfying.

This is why instilling an appreciation of entrepreneurship – by which I mean the Silicon Valley-style startup culture – needs to be part of the modern academic method.

To make entrepreneurship a core part of journalism education is not a simple task, but Arizona State University, where I'm working, is among several schools pushing ahead on this idea, and the early experiments are gratifying. Several of our student projects have won funding to create real businesses, and we have high hopes for others. At City University of New York, Jeff Jarvis has received foundation funding for student projects to continue after the class is over, based on semester-ending competitive "pitches" to a judging panel of journalists and investors. We need to see more and more of these and other kinds of experiments.

What does this imply? Among other things, we have to realise that many of our best students, particularly the ones with a genuine entrepreneurial bent, will not graduate as scheduled, if ever. They'll create or join startups while they have the passion and energy, and we should encourage them to try.

But if we can give our students an appreciation for the startup culture – the ambiguities, plus the ownership of the process and outcome – they won't just be better prepared for doing or joining their own startups. They'll also be better off inside the smarter large enterprises of the future, because those organisations will need people who understand how to move quickly with the times.

All this suggests a considerably broader mission for journalism schools and programmes than the one they've had in the past. It also suggests a huge opportunity for journalism schools. The need for this kind of training has never been greater. We're not the only ones who can do it, but we may be among the best equipped.