

## Why you should (still) major in journalism

**O**N A WARM SUMMER NIGHT, I'm volunteering at the check-in desk at a community event. During a lull, I chat with a fellow volunteer. As often happens, the topic turns to work. After learning I'm a professor, he asks what I teach.

"Journalism," I said.

"I'm sorry," he replied.

How many of you have had similar conversations? Journalism faculty hear it from students, too. They say their parents are worried they won't find jobs.

I had a student whose parents kept giving her grief for majoring in journalism. I asked what their reaction would be if she told them she had changed her major to "digital media communications." She said they'd be impressed, given that so many new jobs focus on digital media.

When many students first hear "journalism," they tend to think of legacy media, especially print. So some journalism schools and departments have reorganized to focus more on the word "media." We did it, too — adding the word "multimedia" to our journalism track.

But the name change debate misses the larger point: What is the true purpose of a journalism education? In a past era, when our graduates could easily find a job at

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a local newspaper or broadcast outlet, our primary role of professional training made sense. But now, nearly a fifth of journalism graduates work in non-communications fields, according to a University of Georgia study, and nearly seven in 10 college journalism students study PR and advertising. Knowing this career change, we should rethink our core purpose.

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I first read Schaffer's argument in a MediaShift post in 2014. She made the case that journalism should be a degree that "can get you a job just about anywhere." She's

absolutely right. The journalism degree focuses on a set of skills that are valuable to many potential employers, in information and tech sectors, in non-profits, in government — in just about any business that values critical thinking and communication.

Ask your students: What business would turn away a potential employee who can wade through an endless sea of information, separating out the most credible and relevant pieces? Who can synthesize that information, then share it with focused audiences using a combination of writing, visual communication and technology? These are the skills that today's employers are looking for.

So what does it take for us to get there? In an interview for a Knight report on journalism education's future, Schaffer recommended starting with a renewed focus on research, problem-solving and social entrepreneurship. That could mean revising our curricula, which I know can be controversial. But even if wholesale curricular innovation isn't possible, individual journalism educators should start reframing the value of what we teach.

I regularly trumpet five skills that I believe are at the core of our journalism program: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity and curiosity. Every one of my classes, and every one of the projects in each class, directly aims to build at least one of these skills.

I can't take credit for those "five C's." The Journalism Education Association uses part of the framework. It's based on the Partnership for 21st Century Skills' "four C's": critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. A friend likes to add the fifth C, "curiosity," a skill that I think is at the core of journalistic work.

In addition to focusing on the skills, let's show students where those skills can take them. We need to celebrate the achievements of not only our students who get great media internships and jobs, but also those who use their journalism skills for good elsewhere.

We should give our students tools that show how valuable this degree is. One favorite tool comes from Ben Schmidt, an assistant professor of history at Northeastern University who analyzes big data. On his website — [benschmidt.org/jobs](http://benschmidt.org/jobs) — he has an amazing visualization of census data that shows how popular college majors relate to various professions. Check it out to explore the wide range of jobs that journalism majors have. I use this to show students some possibilities.

In an era when we're told millennials will change jobs and even careers three or four times by age 30, we should embrace and share with our students the broad value of the journalism degree beyond the newsroom. ♦



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