

## ‘Taking the J out of the J-School’ Motivations and processes of program name changes

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### Abstract

As student enrollments, industry trends, and professional demands embrace the digital media landscape, journalism schools throughout the country are reconsidering their own brands. Specifically, many are asking if the program’s name accurately reflects its course content and curriculum, but also if the program projects an ideal image to the profession. The current study questions administrators at schools that changed names and asks what motivated the name change, as well as the processes by which name changes were considered and approved.

In 1992, when the Manship School of Journalism at Louisiana State University changed its name to the Manship School of Mass Communication to better reflect its course offerings (LSU, 2013), it was among the first to reject its “journalism” moniker. At the time, many programs nationwide had names that reflected only journalism, or included both journalism and mass communication. LSU’s move led some in academia to say Manship was taking the “J” out of the J-school. More than two decades later, West Virginia University (2014) changed its program name from the Reed School of Journalism to the Reed College of Media. The rationale was to better represent the diversity of its academic programs and its focus on preparing students for the changing media environment. Similar changes unfolded throughout the country at programs large and small, with many putting other words ahead of journalism or eliminating the term entirely.

Internet and digital technologies have changed the fields of advertising, journalism, and public relations forever. These fields have embraced new busi-

ness models (Carvajal, Garcia-Aviles, & Gonzalez, 2012; Kaye & Quinn, 2010), changed skills for practice (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013; Bor, 2014), and even budded innovation (Pavlik, 2013). Professionals in these respective fields have been forced to expand their toolboxes of skills and adapt to the evolving landscape. University educators are responsible for training the next workforce and imparting relevant skills for industry practice. Generally, however, bureaucratic processes make it difficult for universities to adopt change in a timely manner (Anderson, 1968), and sometimes, faculty are accused of being “out of touch” with industry practice and unable to keep up with the necessary skills required for professional success (Jaschik, 2015). The current study is concerned with the way in which university programs related to advertising, journalism and public relations represent their educational brand by the department or college name. We conduct a survey of the current university landscape and how the fields of advertising, journalism, and public relations are represented by name.

**Keywords:** journalism education, curriculum

### Literature Review

The field of journalism is currently unstable and evolving. Journalism here is used as an umbrella term to describe advertising, journalism, radio, broadcasting, and public relations. With innovations in digital technology and communication platforms, audiences' attention is more divided than ever (Thurman, 2014; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). With the influx of noise and distraction in the media, audience preferences are no longer loyal or predictable (Taneja et al., 2012; Thorson & Wells, 2015; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). What was once believed to be true can no longer be trusted.

Enrollment in journalism programs across the United States is declining (Becker, Vlad, & Simpson, 2013), and many departments are considering merging with other programs or adding new classes outside the current scope. For example, Florida International University merged its School of Journalism and Mass Communication into its College of Architecture and the Arts and Indiana University merged journalism and communication. Emory University closed its journalism program entirely.

Some journalism departments are working to change their curricula and course offerings to be more innovative and to keep up with the changing industry environment. For example, the University of Colorado-Boulder offers an introductory course called Idea Industries meant to give an overview of strategic communication and the creative industries. Texas Tech University offers Public Relations Graphics and Images, a course designed to teach visual communication for the public relations industry. Recognizing the change in journalism and the way people are employed, the University of Iowa offers Freelance Reporting and Writing.

In a survey conducted by The Poynter Institute for Media Studies (2014), educators reported that it is important for journalism graduates to possess the following skills: multimedia expertise, understanding of basic HTML, how to shoot and edit video and photos, tell stories with visuals, and write for different platforms. In that same survey, Poynter found that editors think it is most important that journalism program graduates possess critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and knowledge of teamwork and collaboration – skills not unique to journalism. No longer do job descriptions seek experts in Associated Press style or knowledge of the inverted pyramid. Graduates are expected to have a breadth of skills and

to be flexible—a far different perspective than when Walter Williams founded the Missouri School of Journalism at the University of Missouri in 1908, the first journalism school in the U.S. (Winfield, 2008).

Programs that offer majors or emphases in advertising and public relations are seeing rapid increases in enrollment (Quesenberry, Coolson, & Wilkerson, 2015). This is reflective of the growth seen most recently in these professional fields of practice. Neill and Schauster (2015) interviewed executives in advertising and public relations agencies to identify what skills are necessary for success in the industry, and found that writing and presentation skills are essential. The authors also noted that students in advertising and public relations need crossover skills. Some programs offer strategic communication majors or emphases instead of keeping advertising and public relations in unique courses or tracks (“silos”). For example, Elon University's School of Communications offers a bachelor of arts with a major in strategic communication, an integration of advertising and public relations. In contrast, the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication offers a bachelor of arts with a major in advertising, journalism, or public relations.

Many journalism and mass communication programs around the U.S. have included some kind of digital class to their curricula. For example, Michigan State University offers Digital Media Planning and Buying for advertising majors and Auburn University offers Digital Technology Journalism for journalism majors. It is easier for some programs to update course content than others for a variety of reasons, e.g., human resources, university processes, etc.

This adoption of technology and new systems may be explained Rogers' (2004) diffusion of innovations theory. For Rogers, innovation, communication channels, time, and social system are the four key components of the diffusion of innovations. For an innovation to catch on, it must reach a critical mass of innovators and early adopters to help share the innovation with others. In the present case, a few programs had adopted the term media and a greater influx of schools has followed.

Academic programs often seek accreditation. Of the 190 members of the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication, 115 are fully accredited by the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC) in the U.S. ACEJMC's accrediting standards are to

ensure the fostering of high standards for the educational preparation of journalism and mass communication professionals. "Journalism and mass communications are vital forces in democratic societies, and sound intellectual training and competence are essential for those who engage in them" (ACEJMC, 2013). However, other programs large and small have chosen not to pursue ACEJMC's accreditation. Instead, reviews are being conducted by industry professionals and other experts in the field. Previous research (Seamon, 2010) have examined various differences between journalism programs accredited and not accredited by ACEJMC, but there is no evidence that accredited programs are superior to programs not accredited. In fact, studies generally find more similarities than differences.

As university budgets tighten, retention rates and job placement numbers matter immensely as schools and departments across campuses compete for resources. A college or department name is often what potential students encounter first before course offerings; the name acts as a marketing tool for many programs. Current course subject matter and impressive alumni employment positions may be what eventually lure students to various programs, but it is more important than ever for journalism education to be flexible and created for the future of the profession. Attracting and sustaining student enrollment is a complicated process that requires knowledge of potential students thoughts about majors, as well as educational and career goals (Selingo, 2013).

The current study examines the names of journalism programs and explores the motivations and processes by which programs have changed names. Thus, the following research question is proposed for study:

RQ1: What names are typical for journalism programs?

RQ2: How did journalism programs that have changed their names do so?

RQ3: Why did journalism programs that have changed their names do so?

### Method

This research used a combination of methods to answer the research question. Names of the 190 programs as listed in the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication directory were examined. Next, a survey of administrators of journalism programs in the United States was conducted. An open-ended survey asked questions about the

process by which programs changed names and why the change was initiated and/or occurred. The survey was sent by email to 190 administrators of ASJMC schools; 17 administrators responded to the survey. The call specifically sought the opinions of leaders at schools where a name change had occurred or was considered. Thus, the responses reflect only schools where the naming issue has been a recent conversation.

### Findings

RQ1 asked what names are typical for journalism programs. Fewer than 10% of all the ACEJMC-accredited programs that offer advertising and public relations in addition to news journalism are labeled as only "journalism." Most opt for an additional moniker, such as communication, mass communication, or media. Table 1 shows the names used for ACEJMC-accredited programs.

**Table 1:**  
**Names used in ACEJMC-program names**

Names of smallest unit containing advertising, news, public relations and visual communication majors (if existing) in programs accredited by ACEJMC as of 2016:

Journalism:	68
Communication:	37
Mass Communication:	33
Media/Mass Media/Media Studies:	19
Information:	4
Public Relations:	4
New Media:	2
Broadcasting:	1
Entertainment:	1
Strategic Communication:	1
Public Communication:	1
Integrated Marketing Communication:	1
Graphic Communication:	1

*Note: Some units have multiple names (School of Journalism & Mass Communication), and thus are counted for both terms. Names represent the smallest unit within a college that contains advertising, news, public relations and visual communication, if existing, even if only the news unit was ACEJMC accredited.*

Some programs also choose to accredit only their journalism program, and separate advertising and public relations into their own department(s) within

a college. This research considered the names of the narrowest unit (department, school, college) containing all of these. Some noteworthy names include the University of Alabama's College of Communication and Information Sciences, Arkansas State University's College of Media and Communication, Colorado State University's Department of Journalism and Media Communication, the University of Illinois' College of Media, the University of Mississippi's Meek School of Journalism and New Media, the University of North Carolina's School of Media and Journalism, and West Virginia University Reed College of Media.

Considering the names, mergers of journalism and communication were quite common, especially among smaller programs. Departments of Journalism and Communication or Communication and Journalism make efficient use of administrators. For some programs, college-level mergers have combined journalism and communication departments and have been branded as colleges of communication, with units for advertising, journalism, public relations, interpersonal communication, and more.

At schools with more diverse areas of study, typically medium and large schools, the term of the moment is media. From the University of North Carolina School of Media and Journalism to West Virginia University Reed College of Media, freestanding colleges have included media first in their names in changes in the last five years. Others have included media with journalism in their names. The University of Memphis program has opted for the Department of Journalism and Strategic Media, and nearby University of Mississippi has the Meek School of Journalism and New Media. At the college level, Marshall University W. Page Pitt School of Journalism and Mass Communications is a part of the College of Arts and Media, along with schools of Art & Design and Music & Theatre. Similarly, Middle Tennessee State University School of Journalism is a part of the College of Media and Entertainment, along with Electronic Media Communication and Recording Industry. Similarly, the University of Colorado's College of Media, Communication and Information includes programs in journalism, strategic communication, communication, information sciences, media studies, and more. The "media" moniker serves as a communal term for journalism and mass communication.

RQ2 asked how journalism programs that have changed their names did so. Using the survey of administrators, this research found that faculty (8, 89%)

and university administrators (7, 78%) were most involved in the name change process. The university's governing board was consulted in 56% (5) of name changes. Alumni (4, 44%) and students (2, 22%) were involved less often. When alumni were consulted, only the alumni board, and not the entire alumni association, was consulted; and, only 33% (3) of schools that consulted alumni required an alumni board vote to approve the change.

RQ3 asked why journalism programs that have changed their names have done so. Overwhelmingly, schools with broad curricula, that is, those with advertising, public relations, visual communication, strategic communication, etc. in addition to journalism, are changing their names away from journalism only, and are either adding a term, or removing journalism entirely. An administrator at the University of Memphis exemplified this thought by saying "journalism fails to describe the full range of our unit's programs."

The University of Mississippi's program changed its name to include media, along with journalism, and added a program in integrated communications. This change brought about a massive growth to the school, and positioned its majors as some of the most popular in its university. An administrator there said the decision was "to be more comprehensive and better reflect the diversity of our programming—and to demonstrate our future-focused approach to teaching media communications." An administrator at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill justified its move by tying the term "journalism" to legacy media "many people see journalism as newspapers; yet, that word is important to our heritage. So, we wanted to retain it. However, media is more all-encompassing and is a better descriptor of what we do in the school."

An administrator at Arkansas State University, which has a converged college including journalism and communications, explained the name as an outcome of the merger of programs and departments within the college.

We reorganized the college to bring our journalism (broadcast, photo, news editorial) programs together, create greater distinction for our strategic communications (advertising, public relations) programs and provide a stronger connection with Communication Studies, which had been added to the college a few years previously. When we created four degree programs (Multimedia Journalism, Creative Media Production, Strategic Communication

and Communications Studies) we realized that the structure needed two departments instead of three, so we came up with Department of Media and Department of Communication. The previous college name was College of Communications, and we realized it was awkward that the name of the college and of one of the departments were so similar. So, we changed the name of the college to reflect the two names of the departments, hence: College of Media and Communication.

The School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of South Carolina retained its name, but changed the name of its college, which also houses the School of Library and Information Science. The administrator said the move was because mass communication is not adequate, as the school teaches “in a world of intensified mass and social media and communication on multiple levels.” Thus, as not all communications are mass communications, program names might be out of date.

School administrators whose departments did not change their names felt their current names reflected their offerings and change was not needed. Leaders said their units were focused on the skills of writing and production for news. “There is another department on campus that studies the effects of mass communication and offers several courses in public relations. We believe that public relations and journalism are opposites,” explained an administrator at the University of Connecticut. “Even though practitioners share some skills (as do physicists, doctors and math teachers, by the way) the goals are completely different. Public relations is an important business function used by companies, organizations and government to shape public opinion. Journalism is an important democratic function that cannot be beholden to companies, organizations or government. The fundamental duty of a journalist is to provide the electorate with information needed to make well-informed decisions. Our goal is to produce journalists who understand and are true to this mission.” The administrator further explained, “We teach only journalism—not PR, marketing, communication theory, etc.”

Meanwhile, at the University of Florida, which already has a merged name of journalism and communication, an administrator said the converged name accurately reflects what is happening in the school’s programs.

Despite the challenges faced by traditional me-

dia, the profession of journalism remains critical to American democracy. As a discipline, it is a strong preparation for any number of roles within media and industry. Communications incorporates advertising and public relations, as well as our program in translational communication.

This separation illustrates a key finding of this research: journalism means news, and advertising, public relations, telecommunication, and graphics fall outside the term, and fit well under the banner of communication, mass communication, or media. Schools that have already bought into the converged name are generally satisfied by the branding, and schools that are called only journalism but offer more than a news curriculum are searching for their own converged brand. When asked if they felt the program’s name accurately reflected curriculum content and industry demands, administrators overwhelmingly responded “yes” (94%). An administrator at West Virginia University said the name works “because everything we do focuses on all forms media communications, whether it be journalism, or advertising/public relations/IMC.” Administrators agreed that communication, mass communication, and media served the non-news journalism aspects of their programs. Another administrator at the University of South Carolina said the vagueness of the terms communication and information serve potential innovations in the fields, saying the names “are encompassed by the breadth of possibilities that lie within and beyond the college. Ours are rapidly changing disciplines. The name of the college is purposely broad.” An administrator at LSU who answered “no” about his program’s name accurately reflecting curriculum content and industry demands bemoaned his program’s name of mass communication: “Mass communication is not really the heartbeat of our discipline anymore.” He added that the name should reflect media in some way.

### **Discussion**

As programs take stock of their curricula and their future, a consideration of the school’s name should be taken. At programs nationwide, the “J” in “J-School” is falling out of favor; only nine ACEJMC-accredited programs out of 115 in the U.S. call themselves only journalism and offer other areas of study outside news. Students are no longer finding the jobs in traditional organizations like they once did (Becker, Vlad & Simpson, 2014), but the skills of a journalism

degree have application across multiple media disciplines. Advertising, public relations, telecommunication, graphics, and other fields are growing, and journalism is declining; therefore, some programs might seek to distance themselves from the legacy of the term "journalism."

When LSU Manship School of Mass Communication made its switch to Mass Communication, it capitalized on the term of the moment. Mass Communication has permeated the discipline, from the name of its programs, its academic association, and its research journals. However, as communications demassify (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Napoli, 2008) the term mass communication could represent another traditional notion, the one-to-many model popularized by Berlo's (1960) Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver framework. The demassified communication sphere is built on the concept of media, where all users can engage with public communication, legacy, digital, mobile, social, and more. The word that unites these terms is *media*, which explains why the buzzword has become the brand for an increasing number of programs.

The notion of journalism being the sole term to define the ever-expanding media field has faded. Missouri's legacy as the first journalism school might be tied to this term, but its peer schools large and small are turning toward broader names, and leaving journalism for only news. With journalism meaning solely the creation of news, programs that have curricula focused on public relations, advertising, and more must consider the message sent by their name. A broad term will help represent programs to students and potential students for what they are, and not what they perceive them to be. Understanding that a college or department name serves as a brand for the program in all its regard, will help recruit potential students and improve brand recognition.

The term media offers an opportunity to position programs as reflective of the current marketplace. Name changes at North Carolina, West Virginia, and Colorado were embraced, and other programs have followed. Even if programs focus on journalism, they certainly go beyond the traditional media outlets of print and broadcast channels. Using the term media would let programs, even those solely focused on news journalism, show their emphasis on digital and social media, as well as news and storytelling. The term media does not have to supplant journalism, but rather can support it, as it did in many of the programs

named in this study.

As more importance is placed on enrollment and retention numbers, visible, clear branding will help students (and advisors!) identify the appropriate program of interest. Job placement is a factor on which many students place great importance as they decide on a university or program (Altonji, Kahn, & Speer, 2006; Xu, 2013). It is more important than ever that curriculum content be relevant and up-to-date and produce students that are desirable in today's job market. This requires faculty and administrators to be flexible and nimble—traits that aren't often associated with academia. However, as funding for higher education continues to decrease and there is more competition for resources (and students), what is in a name might help to make the difference between schools trending up and those remaining stagnant or trending down.

*Limitations:* This study is limited in scope by the nature of its research method and sample. Only a few programs have changed their names recently, and motivations may include new names as part of an endowment. Thus, this study does not seek to take the temperature of the industry as a whole, but rather of those programs that have made a change. As the small response rate reflects the viewpoints of administrators of schools that have considered or completed a name change. However, other administrators and faculty might have different viewpoints about the appropriateness of program names.

*Suggestions for future research:* Future scholars should survey industry professionals, students, faculty, and other stakeholders regarding their attitudes about names used by various schools. Further, scholars should track enrollment trends that follow name changes, to see if new names increase majors consistently. Finally, a content analysis of recruitment materials could examine how schools frame themselves when talking about their programs.

## Conclusion

The media school (M-School) is the way of the future. The broadness of the term anticipates further demassification, extends journalism, and positions schools on the front of innovation. The name change, however, must represent a forward-thinking mindset, as branding must reflect the product. Today's tech-savvy marketplace engages media on multiple platforms, and that media can be the product of journalism, advertising, public relations, and their peer subfields.

Ultimately, schools need to consider if their names reflect their programming content. The J-school does not have to lose the J, but schools have decided the J should not stand alone.

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