A Qualitative Look at Journalism Programs in Flux: The Role of Faculty in the Movement Toward a Digital Curriculum

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Abstract

As journalism continues to grapple with the transition to digital media, journalism educators are constantly considering how to better equip students for this changing field. Particularly in smaller programs where resources, funding, and faculty are limited, updating curriculum can be a challenge. A qualitative, multiple case study centered on curricular decision-making found that faculty members themselves are one of the chief factors in any potential revision of a journalism program. Three U.S. journalism/communications programs in the midst of revising curriculum were studied, and the predominant obstacle to digital curriculum decisions at these institutions was individual members' inability or unwillingness to learn new concepts and technologies. From these findings, journalism and communications programs can compare their contexts to these institutions, noting if a change in faculty hiring, training, or incentives could be beneficial in order to respond to the digital age.

As professional journalism begins to fully embrace digital tools, there has been a delayed response in some higher education journalism programs to such a momentous shift in how news is collected, crafted, distributed, and consumed (Dennis et al., 2003). Digital media, however, is now firmly implanted in professional practice, and there is a growing consensus that emerging media must not just exist but thrive at the academy. "Journalism educators no longer seriously debate the merits of offering undergraduate courses in online, convergence, or multimedia journalism. News has moved online, prompting changes in readership habits and the journalism workforce" (Powers & Incollingo, 2016, p. 1). Yet, some faculty are still struggling to address digital media through curriculum at the post-secondary level — not just within isolated courses, but as a cohesive plan to prepare student journalists for the digital news age.

A 2013 study by News University at the Poynter Institute showed that although 75.41% of journalism academics believed a degree in journalism was important to understanding the values of journalism, only 27.9% of professional journalists agreed (Sivek, 2013). This statistic underlines a disconnect between academic and professional journalism; however, the assessment of the existing curricula was much more alarming. Just a little more than 1% of journalism educators *and* professional journalists believed university

Keywords: Journalism, Curriculum, Digital Media, Small Programs

journalism curricula were staying on pace with changes in the industry (Sivek, 2013). More specifically, the Poynter study and its director, Finberg, noted digital media as one of the largest areas of impasse. Although digital media within curriculum and collaboration across J-Schools and industry "would be significant and challenging changes for many educators and their programs, Finberg argues that having the 'spirit of a startup' is necessary for journalism education to match the innovation of the professionals already in the field" (Sivek, 2013, para. 28).

As Kelley (2007) noted after her qualitative analysis of journalism education history, "one element of this crisis may be our inability as educators and thinkers to not only keep pace with the implications of these changes but to provide coherent direction" (p. 3). The Knight Foundation's 2011 report pointed out innovation *is* happening in journalism programs, but generally at larger and better-funded schools. The report was direct about this gap:

> But is clear to us that a comprehensive change in the practices and culture of journalism education must spread to all schools—big, medium, and small—in order to have the most significant impact on journalism as a whole. Change at just the big schools, despite their leadership, is not enough. (Anderson, Glaisyer, Smith, & Rothfeld, 2011, p. 3)

Particularly for programs with fewer resources, the how and why behind curricular changes must be understood to inform both curriculum and instruction for the future of the fourth estate. This inquiry's purpose was to elucidate emerging themes in the curriculum revision process at institutions, with an eye to obstacles preventing digital media's full inclusion.

Literature Review

Inside of established curricula, journalism faculty have various options to address digital media concepts and skills for students. However, a variety of obstacles and pressures can acutely affect faculty decision-making. Blom and Davenport (2012) surveyed 158 directors of journalism programs regarding journalism curriculum, and among the more than 150 journalism directors, no identical set of seven core courses was named. This finding underscores a lack of consensus among faculty about what journalism programs should be teaching, even without advanced digital media components. Two years ago, Gotlieb, McLaughlin, and Cummins (2017) conducted an online survey of 182 AEJMC-accredited journalism programs. Although the quantitative findings showed a sharp decline in enrollment for many, there was also evidence that some digital curricular shifts were happening, but in various directions. These researchers identified increases in the teaching of skills as diverse as "HTML coding, data analytics, digital design, new media literacy, visual storytelling, real-world problem solving, entrepreneurship, and diversity and cultural awareness" (as cited in Gotlieb et al., 2017, p. 151). Spillman, Kuban, & Smith (2017) made a more recent observation of instructional shifts with a content analysis of course descriptions at 68 university journalism programs. These authors sought to ascertain the level of innovation in new pedagogical approaches as a response to digital media, but they found "few are meeting this challenge" (p. 207).

Even with only lukewarm movement, curricular frameworks are theory until enacted in the context of an institution. Through meta-analysis, Jónasson (2016) found nine categories of elements that could stifle or otherwise prevent curricular revisions at any level of education: a traditionalist notion of learning; reluctance to upset stability of a current system; adherence to standards; opacity of future directions and ideas; convictions related to previous curricular notions; specific interests in elements of current curriculum; lack of instructor training; lack of physical space for transition; and lack of motivation for alterations, possibly due to absent consequences for not challenging the status quo. In academia, administrative processes can prevent curricular changes from gaining enough inertia to be responsive to digital media's changes. Whether it is boundaries set by an institution or accreditation, alterations—particularly wholesale ones—can be a logistical challenge (Auman & Lillie, 2008; Casteneda, 2011; Powers & Incollingo, 2016). Lowrey, Daniels, and Becker (2005) found the same as they collected perspectives from journalism departments across the country, noting one participant who said internal political divisions were an issue, "likening convergence efforts … to the difficult process of 'dismantling silos'" (p. 34).

Part of the complexity is a wide variation in programs. McGee and McGee (2016) conducted an investigation of small, private communication programs in two regions of the United States, centering on 44 institutions that met those criteria. Using quantitative methods, the authors witnessed a high level of diversity, where some programs were housed in their own

colleges or departments and others were contained within larger communication programs. According to McGee and McGee, these varied situations can cause identity issues with curricular change or redesign, as priorities and mission can differ among faculty and administrators.

One contradictory aspect of curricular change in the literature for small journalism programs was their ability to be flexible. From data obtained from the 2002 *Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Enrollments* study, which included information on 468 programs, researchers found smaller programs were actually more successful in their ability to apply convergence to their curricula because "smaller programs are less structurally complex and have less rigidly differentiated tracks, and potentially this would make it easier to converge" (Lowrey et al., 2005, p. 43). However, a later study by Powers and Incollingo (2016) found smaller can, in fact, hamper curricular flexibility because "less attention is typically paid to small journalism programs fighting for resources within larger departments or colleges" (p. 2). The authors noted a number of studies that found journalism program administrators and faculty at odds over funding and faculty allocation in decisions to alter curricula.

Many researchers have said money is a stumbling block to curricular innovation, whether investment in time, equipment, labs, or other financially draining aspects (Auman & Lillie, 2008; Hirst & Treadwell, 2011; Mensing, 2010; Sarachan, 2011). In a wide-ranging study of a Tampa, Florida newsroom, Dupagne and Garrison (2006) found a need to address digital media knowledge, which they noted was challenging for journalism program administrators and faculty considering the "fluctuating economics of higher education" (p. 251). Beyond the literal funding of programs, the financial resources required for an alteration in curricula can be extensive. This need can come in the form of technology but also resources for students and faculty.

Furthermore, journalism instructors identify with a certain medium or journalism skillset and are often not cross-trained themselves (Lowrey et al., 2005). The narrow scope for faculty leads to a lack of flexibility for course selection, particularly in smaller programs. According to the research of McGee and McGee (2016), adjunct faculty taught 20% or more of courses at these smaller institutions. For Hirst and Treadwell's (2011) program, this reality meant a pro-gram that was "grappling with the requirement to up-skill staff in both technical and theoretical competency with Web 2.0 and social media tools, etiquette and techniques" (p. 459).

There is also a call for journalism faculty not native to digital media to either pursue professional development or allow the students to lead—or both (Deuze, 2001; Hirst & Treadwell, 2011). Huang et al.'s (2006) study found that even though more than half of J-Schools in the United States have updated curriculum for convergence, some professors are not prepared to teach digital media courses. At the exclusion of hiring a new faculty, some research points toward value in co-teaching as a solution (Auman & Lillie, 2008).

In addition to content changes in a curriculum, programs are increasingly being asked to address professional acculturation, which for smaller programs can mean more decision-making challenges. This additional requirement comes from a professional sphere that prefers students enter the workforce seamlessly (Kilpert & Shay, 2013; Kuban, 2014; St. Clair, 2015). The professional side of journalism is looking for the next generation to lead the next media metamorphosis, which means not only a tight relationship with the industry but also added curricular load (Wood Adams, 2008).

One other pressure for journalism curricular change is the startling speed at which digital media remakes its own reality (Drake, 2017). Even 15 years ago, research by Beam, Kim, and Voakes (2003) found journalism faculty overwhelmed by the stressors of adapting to ever-changing technology. The same exhaustion and challenges can be found today, as students, educators, and practitioners work to grasp the most recent development in light of continuing upgrades and inventions (Walck, Cruikshank, & Kalyango, 2015). Therefore, one of this qualitative inquiry's questions was to explore what primary factors are shaping these smaller programs' choices about digital media in journalism curricula.

Method

Using a constructivist paradigm, three U.S. institutions with journalism/communications programs were chosen for this inductive multiple case study. Although far from exhaustive, this qualitative study's sample size was meant to target institutions currently revising their curriculum with an emphasis on the role of digital media. The institutions were recruited

due to their affiliation with the AEJMC Small Programs Interest Group (SPIG), and they represent three disparate structures and contexts, therefore providing more value to the study's applicability to other environments. Methodological triangulation was employed with document analysis of the former and revision (or current) curriculum, a survey in the form of an online questionnaire for faculty, and semi-structured interviews with two leaders or decision-makers regarding that program's curriculum change.

Institution A, which had an enrollment of approximately 3,000 students, with approximately 150 majors in its communications/journalism program and 12 full-time faculty, had two full-time faculty members interviewed, identified by the pseudonyms Annie and Victoria. Six online questionnaires were distributed, and six were completed by full-time faculty members. Institution B had an enrollment of approximately 5,000 students, with approximately 130 majors in its communications/journalism program and seven full-time faculty. Two full-time faculty members were interviewed, identified by the pseudonyms Dolores and Franklin. Two online questionnaires were distributed, and two were completed by other full-time faculty members. Institution C had an enrollment of approximately 10,000 students, with approximately 400 majors in its communications/ journalism program and nine full-time faculty. Two full-time faculty members were interviewed and are identified by the pseudonyms Louise B and Orville. Twelve online questionnaires were distributed, and three were completed by other full-time faculty members in Institution C's program.

Document, questionnaire, and interview analyses were completed through inductive, open coding processes, and in the end, trustworthiness and dependability were established with an external audit, reflexive journaling, and the above-mentioned triangulation.

Results

For Institution A, a number of faculty found the ever-changing nature of digital tools and technology as an obstacle to keeping the curriculum updated. Phrases such as "there keep being new media that we have to master" illustrated this. The majority of the comments from both interviews and questionnaires at Institution A, however, revolved around Institution A's faculty, both in training or expertise as well as disposition to digital-focused curricular change. Part of

the limitation on faculty knowledge came from the nature of a small program, as well as fewer opportunities to gain full-time faculty lines. Annie said she feels "a sense of despair about that" because she believes a return to a time when faculty are hired often will not come. "I don't think that universities are ever going to feel motivated to hire as many tenured faculty as they used to. They can get away with not doing it so why should they do it? It's cheaper," according to Annie. Victoria agreed more faculty, specifically with digital media specialties, would aid in the curriculum revision work. For Victoria, the inability to gain faculty with digital expertise left the process without direction: "It's the chicken and the egg: How do we rethink it if we don't know what it is? To put out a call to hire someone, how do we put out a call if we don't rethink what the program is and know what we are looking for?" Victoria said there were currently students in the program who had interests in areas of the media for which there were not faculty who shared that expertise. Although all full-time faculty members had a seat at the table for curricular changes at Institution A, Annie noted some voices won out due to a perceived inflexibility about the curriculum and what courses were taught. "People who have been there a long time know how to make sure that their courses are part of the core, part of the central mission of the department," according to Annie. Victoria noted major curriculum changes, including those having to do with digital media, were "threatening" and a "major challenge for many of the faculty," particularly as students started gravitating toward aspects of the curriculum that were not in faculty research areas. "People are comfortable; they love what they do, so they don't necessarily want to change what they do," Victoria said. Part of the tension, according to Victoria, was that some courses do not fill because they were crafted to meet faculty "needs and interests and not students' needs and interests." Victoria did note that some faculty members are flexible, but others will not alter what they teach or their perspectives on the curriculum, which led to less willingness to adapt. However, Victoria's perspective was optimistic, even with this challenge from faculty: "This is their life, it's how they define who they are, and change is hard, and I get that. We are working to try and help people move forward, and we will get there; I know we will."

For Institution B, the majority of comments from both interviews and questionnaires revolved around Institution B's faculty, as Franklin said one of the

roadblocks to comprehensive curricular change was who was part of the program's faculty. Dolores agreed, and noted with just seven full-time faculty, it would be exceedingly difficult to add a class that could be interesting to both a faculty member and students, in addition to the basic courses needed to complete the degree. Dolores said,

> So being a smaller program, when you're thinking about scheduling and what people can teach and what they can't teach, and people's availability and putting the schedule together and what loads work, I think that's challenging, so that will definitely be part of the discussion.

Although Institution B's program is stable with its numbers currently, according to Franklin, asking for more faculty to expand digital or other offerings would be challenging because "you have a provost who's going to say well, you're making it work as it is. Why would we give you another faculty line?" The factor of faculty disagreement or inflexibility due to a digital media-driven curricular change was also broached. Franklin said: "I do think internal faculty disagreements can really hinder us," and Dolores added, thinking back to the previous curriculum changes approximately five years ago, "not everybody saw everything the same way." For this specific curricular endeavor, Franklin said all full-time faculty, each of whom had a voice in the decision-making, started conversations about what each would like in a new curriculum and with digital media, but they soon "went in circles." So, the faculty members determined they would individually draft what a perfect curriculum would look like. Then, they would try to "compromise and smash them all together or whatever we have to do," according to Franklin.

Although Franklin and Dolores did not foresee a lot of contentiousness within the forthcoming discussions, through their own research and other experiences, they both asserted faculty can get "very territorial" when constructing or reimagining a curriculum. Franklin pointed out, although he said he disliked stereotyping by age, that inflexibility tended to be more prominent with the "older generation" for most programs, particularly with new technologies and tools. However, Franklin noted the other obstacle within faculty inflexibility is with faculty members who "think they're keeping up, and they're not." Another faculty member, through the online questionnaire, corroborated this concern:

> We are very behind the times. Every single faculty member should integrate digital media into their classroom in some form. Only about half do. And only one or two do so on a regular basis.

One of the other factors involving faculty inflexibility tied back to a term that Franklin heard at a conference, ambiguity intolerance, as a reticence to change or deal well with the unknown.

> In this particular program, I would say two of the seven maybe have a problem with ambiguity tolerance. And part of it, too, I don't know that I necessarily have a high ambiguity tolerance. I like structure, and I like rules and procedures.

At Institution C, several faculty mentioned the inherently difficult nature of complete curriculum redesign, even when needed. Louise B said faculty does not always understand curriculum and assessment, especially that learning outcomes must be measurable. When curriculum design was done only in part, Louise B said, "you're really missing the big picture. You're providing someone with something that 'looks' like you've done your job,' but in reality, if you dig in, you would realize there are some problems that are underlying it." Orville pointed to the fact that Institution C's status as a smaller program makes curriculum revision difficult, even when it is clear that digital media necessitates change. Yet again, the majority of the comments from both interviews and questionnaires revolved around Institution C's faculty, both in training or expertise as well as participation in curricular revisions and disposition to digital media curricular change. Two specific obstacles were mentioned regarding faculty ability or willingness to participate in curriculum redesign discussions. First, Louise B said although all faculty participate in decision-making, there was a delineation between tenured and non-tenured faculty views and perhaps a corresponding willingness to provide an honest perspective. Orville mentioned the curriculum revision issues with digital media are also difficult to balance due to the nature of faculty responsibilities in a small program:

> Outside of this project, our big issue is assessment of learning outcomes; balancing out our workloads; a lot of students; advising; administrative tasks; even if there was a real will to upgrade a particular skill set, that's not a high priority for our institution. Getting through

the day-to-day.

Although Orville said he would like to see more courses employ social and digital media tools and concepts, or even reporting across platforms, but the abilities of the current faculty inhibited that. "Everybody's got limited skill sets, and again our faculty are mostly critics and theorists and researchers, and that's what we want in a Ph.D.," Orville said. He said he would love to be able to have more faculty, smaller classes, and more hands-on options, but those elements were not congruent with current higher education staffing philosophies:

> I've been in academe since 1990, and in the old days, we weren't counting chairs. It wasn't such a premium to have every seat in every class filled; you could have seminars with eight or ten students, and you can't anymore. A seminar with eight students automatically cancels. It's becoming much more production-oriented. It's become more about filling the seats than providing skill sets.

Orville also noted a "dynamic tension" between what employers and students want in comparison with what faculty know how to teach. He said industry professionals want students to be able to navigate the latest apps, software, and hardware, but the faculty is theory and research faculty. "So, we are hiring people coming in to be researchers and not to be digital technicians. We'd like to do more, but we also want Ph.D.s, and lecturers and technicians don't get paid very well," Orville said.

Orville also asserted that in general, faculty were often unengaged in the effort to move the curriculum toward a digital-centered model:

> There really isn't that move to really develop the more digital priority. They're very happy with curriculum as it stands; they're not really looking for much development. We're trying to look at it; the people we have are recommitting to the liberal arts model, and that's fine, but as far as becoming more technically savvy, that's usually somebody else's job.

Louise B mentioned when curriculum revision or digital media topics are broached, "part of it is we talk past each other. I've often said that communications is plagued by horrible communication, as a discipline." She also mentioned what she called an "epistemological disconnect," and said faculty members work to get their research and areas of interest into a curriculum instead of looking at what is needed regarding digital media and the discipline:

> You could almost look at the curriculum and go: this class is here to serve Professor A, and this class is here to serve Professor B, and this class is here to serve Professor C. . . . It gets into this quid pro quo of touching on personal desires instead of the more holistic view of what are we doing for the student. Too often it seems like the curriculum is there to serve the faculty much more than it is to serve student.

As outlined by the participants across all three programs, the following themes emerged in the qualitative interviews with faculty at Institutions A, B, and C: concerns about rapidly changing digital tools, pressure to keep enrollment healthy with current faculty and technological resources, limitations on current faculty digital training and knowledge, and lack of interest or unwillingness of current faculty to participate in innovative digital training or growth.

Discussion

Emerging from this qualitative, multiple case study was the concept that a number of faculty members in these three institutions were striving to revise curriculum due to digital media changes in the discipline of communications/journalism. Although each program was unique regarding funding, resources, students, and the institution itself, there were strong, shared themes regarding the actions and attitudes of faculty members.

Each program in this study reported students "voting with their feet" toward skills and technology-based courses that highlighted innovation and interdisciplinarity. Shifts in numbers then led these small programs to struggle with staffing digital media-oriented courses within their current curriculum, as all three institutions' faculty reported a limited ability to carry out innovative curricular visions due to personnel.

A lack of faculty in numbers, and the larger unwillingness for institutions to add more faculty with specific expertise, was a limiting factor in designing and implementing a more digital-oriented curriculum, according to all three institutions. According to Franklin of Institution B:

> So, it is the number of bodies, but that's the thing: When we talk about sports journalism, we can't do that right now because there are two of us who are maybe halfway qualified to teach it, and I'm one of them. But if I do

that, what would we do? Would we not teach law, or not teach media ethics? We can't all do overloads; the university wouldn't support it anyway. So we're back to making choices about what we can do and what we can't do.

With a more robust and diverse faculty roster, some faculty members believed they could imagine a more innovative, digital media curriculum, but with the small amount of faculty at present, it seemed much less possible to be progressive. Limitations on hiring practices were also voiced by faculty in each of the programs.

Another element of universality between these three programs was a lack of continuous faculty training and therefore expertise in digital media. According to Orville,

> we'd like to do it [learning and social media] across the platforms, and we address it across the platforms, but everybody's got limited skill sets, and again our faculty are mostly critics and theorists and researchers and that's what we want in a Ph.D.

A research study on general curricular alterations with educators found that in tackling innovative practices "teachers face the following barriers: lack of knowledge, lack of time and overload" (Zinkevicienė, 2005, para. 81). These elements were also present at all three institutions, where faculty were said to be untrained in digital media but also so overwhelmed by other duties and expectations that pursuing that knowledge was unlikely.

Victoria, from Institution A, likened the problem of digital media-trained faculty and digital-facing curriculum to the circular logic of the chicken and egg: both faculty and expertise are needed to create such a change—at the same time. This complication was true for each program, as most mentioned they did not have the personnel, resources, training, or expertise to remake their curriculum to reflect digital principles, nor could they hire anyone to do so.

However, there was a third faculty-based element that dealt with faculty willingness to teach or research outside of a given area that was cited as a roadblock to curricular change. "So, I think to put it into a nutshell, too frequently, the obstacle is the curriculum is there to serve the faculty instead of being there to serve the student," Louise B said. This criticism, that the curriculum was built around faculty interests instead of student needs or the state of the industry, was common. Victoria said, "we have students who have an interest in different areas of the media, and we have faculty who are committed to their work, but we need to provide new ways of looking at it." As one study showed, "professors cited the need for more classroom resources–from textbooks to case studies to the development of entrepreneurial networks–to help them learn and teach this new body of knowledge" (Ferrier, 2012, p. 21), but there has to be intentional engagement in gaining new knowledge, continually with digital media changes, for this to work, especially with only a handful of faculty in play. With a focus on researchers and not digital technicians, as Orville from Institution C noted, or with faculty blatantly unwilling to evolve with digital media tools, these programs did not feel they had the personnel, resources, training, or expertise to execute a new curriculum to reflect digital principles.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This inquiry of journalism programs endeavored to understand the how and why behind faculty decision-making when it came to curriculum revision due to digital media. The implication of the lack of faculty training, expertise, and willingness to engage in digital media curriculum revision could signal a need to build ambiguity tolerance in faculty, as Franklin of Institution B would assert. Faculty members at smaller institutions would need to become acquainted with, if not proficient using, changing tools and technologies—however uncomfortable or time-consuming that process could be. Royal (2014) asserted as much in a Nieman Lab article that asked "Are Journalism Schools Teaching Their Students the Right Skills?":

> If you are a journalism educator or media professional, I have news for you: We work in tech. I know: That's not exactly what you signed up for when you entered the profession 20, 10, or even five years ago. But things have changed. While some of the tenets of the profession we formerly knew as journalism have remained, workflows, business practices, participants, and competitors are all very different. Because we work in tech. Internet and web technologies don't just represent a new medium where print and multimedia can live in harmony. The ways we communicate both personally and professionally have been profoundly altered. Communication is technology, and technology is communication. That's the true convergence. (paras. 1–3)

For faculty members who are anxious, unable, or unwilling to enter into the new journalism education paradigm that is filled with digital media concepts and tools, the implication is that they may have to, or as Victoria from Institution A noted, they will be asked to "change or get out of the way."

As the craft and discipline continue to evolve, journalism education's quest to stay relevant will likely not resolve quickly (Adam, 2001; Bor, 2014; de Burgh, 2003; Mensing, 2010; Royal, 2005). As this qualitative multiple case study has illustrated, journalism programs are entering into curriculum revision, discussing and debating how they should integrate or augment frameworks with digital media. They are concerned with enrollment moving forward, but they do not feel they have the current faculty resources to fully dive into the digital journalism era.

In order to meet these changing needs, many journalism programs, and the institutions where they reside, may need to focus more of their budgets on continuous and meaningful training for all journalism and communications faculty, so instructors and researchers can stay current on evolving media trends and diversify their skill sets, regardless of their current area of scholarship. As Royal (2016) wrote in "Preparing the Digital Educator-Scholar Hybrid" for Nieman Lab, "In a dynamically changing environment, in which digital is a given, we can no longer support this lecturer-professor divide. Every hire a journalism program makes must be able to teach courses in the digital realm" (para. 2). In small programs specifically, such training and continuing education could be weighted as part of faculty responsibilities or even toward tenure and promotion as having greater value. "Administrators have a role in supporting innovation within the academy and the faculty who are willing to engage in it" (Ferrier, 2012, p. 22). Incentivizing a digital media understanding would particularly aid programs that are limited in number of faculty, so students can receive exposure to digital tools and concepts across the curriculum.

Faculty training would be an area ripe for further study as it pertains to digital media tools and technologies and not just conceptual digital media research. The larger question is how programs can gain both scholar-researchers as well as pragmatic, digital technicians as journalism education moves forward into the digital future.

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