INNOVATION IN JOURNALISM
STUDIO ONE SYLLABUS, FALL 2017
New York University, Studio 20
David Westphal, Instructor

“Innovate or die.” -- Bill Gates, Tom Peters (and many others)
“Innovation happens when there are no guarantees.” – Mary Powell, CEO, Green Mountain Power

“Failure is essential. There’s no substitute for it. It’s not just encouraged but required.” – Mike Birbiglia

This course will explore the wave of innovation that is sweeping journalism as a result of the digital disruption that is damaging news companies’ business models and creating more methods for covering the news. Students will examine the history of innovation in journalism, the causes of the current business disruption, the reinvention attempts by Old Media, the creation of new models and techniques, and the nature of innovation itself. They will try their own hand at innovation, creating basic prototypes for a new journalism form or new business.

The course will address these questions:

**What is innovation?**
Innovation is not simply what’s new. What is it specifically? Where does it come from? What kinds of innovation exist? Can anyone do it?

**Why is innovation happening now in journalism?**
The news business has been a huge money-maker for a long time. Why is it -- or why are parts of it -- suddenly on the skids? What is most threatened? What role is true innovation playing in this upheaval?

**What is the history of innovation in journalism?**
A look at some of journalism’s past innovations, and at the innovators. What did the news industry do to adapt to the digital revolution? Why has it proved to be so inadequate?

**What is Old Media doing to reinvent itself?**
What are organizations like The New York Times, NPR, television news doing to adapt to the digital age? What are their key innovations? Can newspapers in particular find a way out?

**What are the new journalism enterprises being created?**
Hundreds of new businesses and nonprofits have been launched in response to the news industry’s upheaval. What characterizes those that have been successful? What characterizes those that have not been? What are their key innovations?
Students’ Work

Readings: Weekly readings are listed in the syllabus and will be added to or reduced by the instructor. Students must read two books and excerpts from several others:
“Where Good Ideas Come From -- A Natural History of Innovation” by Stephen Johnson.
“Originals,” by Adam Grant.
Most readings will be online links. Students must come prepared to discuss readings in class. Each week two students will be designated as discussion leaders for the week.

Blogs: Students will establish a new blog on a class network, and must blog at least once a week on the topic of innovation. In some cases the topic of the blog will be assigned; in other cases it will be up to the student to choose a blog topic. Examples: Thoughts on the readings of the week; notes on a presentation the student is making; an innovation brainstorm.

Presentations: Students will be assigned presentations they will make individually or in groups. These will be assigned a week in advance.

Capstone presentation: Students’ final presentation, done individually, will be to create a journalism innovation, a new-media startup, or a revised business plan for an existing enterprise. In addition to an in-class presentation, students will write a paper describing their innovation.

Speakers: Roughly every other week, students will hear from speakers who will tell their own stories of innovation. Students will be responsible for researching the speakers in advance, and for participation in a robust Q & A session with them at the end of their presentation.

WEEK ONE (Sept. 5)

Course Introduction

What has caused the rush to innovation in journalism? Will mainstream media be able to reinvent itself? Will startups become kings of the news business? How is the craft of journalism changing? How has the relationship between journalist and audience changed, and what does that mean for the future of innovation?

Student, teacher introductions
Class rules/procedures
Discussion on plagiarism
Blog startup
Readings/sources of information
Students discuss their news and digital habits and backgrounds
Instructor’s preview of the class
Discussion
Knight Ridder video
Slides giving context to the news business

WEEK TWO (Sept. 12)

Why journalism and the news business are in an innovation frenzy. How the news business went from record profits to a fight for its life in a very short time. Why did it wait so long to innovate? Was its sudden decline preventable?


READINGS


Michael Barthel, Despite Subscription Surges for Largest U.S. newspapers, circulation and revenue fall for industry overall, Pew Research Center, June 1, 2017.


Rasmus Klein Nielsen, “Ten Years That Shook the Media World,” Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, October 2012, Pages 3-12, 63-70.


WEEK THREE (Sept. 19)

A look at innovation. Where does it come from? Who does it? Is necessity really the main driver of innovation? What are its different manifestations? What does a culture of innovation look like, feel like? And the start of looking at the history of innovation in mainstream media.

Individual presentations: Students profile a non-journalism-related innovation that has special relevance to their lives.

READINGS


Ben Casselman, “Corporate America Hasn’t Been Disrupted,” Five Thirty-Eight, August 8, 2014.


WEEK FOUR (Sept. 26)

History of News Business Innovation. The news business wasn’t always such a wasteland of innovation. There are many examples in American history of news/journalism innovation, in technology, business models, journalism craft. But there’s also a long record of missed opportunities.
Group Presentations: Students report on a news-business or journalism innovation from the past. Or a missed opportunity to innovate.

READINGS


WEEK FIVE (Oct. 3)

Mainstream media’s reinvention crusade. However late they were to the game, mainstream media in the United States are now on an innovation kick. What are they doing to reinvent their businesses? Are they finding success?

Presentations: Students profile one mainstream media’s reinvention campaign. Is it working? Will it work?

READINGS


Caroline Scott, “Audience Revenue Share Continues to Grow,” journalism.co.uk, June 14, 2016.

Kristen Hare, “We’re Starting to See a New Blueprint for Reinventing Legacy Newsrooms,” Poynter, May 24, 2106.


Ricardo Bilton, “Video is Giving the New Yorker a New Way to Reach Readers,” NiemanLab, April 6, 2016.

WEEK SIX (Oct. 10)

Innovation in the craft of journalism. New forms of news gathering, reporting and presentation have emerged with the aid of digital tools. Use of data. Crowdsourcing. New story forms. The public is getting in on the action, too. Professional journalists no longer have a lock on storytelling. The sacred standard of “objectivity” is giving way to voices that stand for something.

Group presentation: Students profile a recent innovation in the craft of journalism.

READINGS


OPTIONAL READINGS


WEEK SEVEN (Oct. 17)

Startups (Part I). The for-profits. Hundreds of news businesses have been launched since the digital revolution began taking its toll on Old Media. The first of a two-week look at these startups will be for-profits.

Group presentations: Students profile a news startup.

READINGS


Alex Blumberg startups podcast (Listen to a few minutes of Part I, at least)

Laura Hazard Owen, “…Recode Looks at its Future…” NiemanLab, May 9, 2016.


Joseph Lichterman, “Millennial-focused Local Startup Charlotte Agenda is Expanding its Model to a Second City,” NiemanLab, May 17, 2016.


Laura Hazard Owen, “The Information Launches an Accelerator for Subscription News Sites, with Investments Starting at $25,000,” July 28, 2017.


OPTIONAL READINGS


WEEK EIGHT (Oct. 24)

Startups (Part II). Non-profits. With revenue models still hard to achieve, many startups have turned to philanthropy. Might contributions, big and small, be a missing revenue link for news organizations?

Blog assignment: Profile a local news site, or an investigative or health nonprofit.

Prominent local news sites
NiemanLab Encyclo Project: MinnPost, Voice of San Diego, New Haven Independent, Texas Tribune.

Investigative, International and Health Nonprofits

ProPublica's Culture of Innovation
Justin Ellis, “Pro Publica Sees $30,000 in New Revenue from Data Store,” NiemanLab, July 14, 2014.


Justin Ellis, “In the World of Nonprofit News, Different Paths to Sustainability for Local and State News Sites,” NiemanLab, April 8, 2015.


WEEK NINE (Oct. 31)


Tom O’Malia, “The Entrepreneurial Journey,” South-Western Press, 2008. (Selected Chapters)


David Boraks, “Farewell, That’s All the News for Now,” davidson.net, May 29, 2015.


Noah Davis, "If You Don't Click on This Story I Don't Get Paid," The Awl, September 8, 2015.


WEEK TEN (Nov. 7)

Making News Pay (Part II) -- What are the news business’ revenue models? What are the new models being attempted? Can journalism find a replacement for its huge reliance on advertising?

Projects Roundtable. The end-of-term assignment is to craft a feasibility plan for a new-media startup, or a new business unit within an existing news company. In this class, students will present their idea, or ideas, and explain why they think their startup idea is worth exploring.

READINGS


Lucia Moses, “Politico’s Jim VandeHei: Scale is a ‘Deal with the Devil,’” Digiday, June 4, 2015.


Ricardo Bilton, "...Berkeleyside Wants to Turn its Readers into its Newest Owners," NiemanLab, October 12, 2016.


Optional Readings


WEEK ELEVEN (Nov. 14)

The Journalism Innovators. What kind of people are innovators? Are they risk-takers? Just natural geniuses? (Or do they just work harder than anybody else?)

Individual presentations: Students profile a news-related entrepreneur.
Non-journalism organizations doing journalism. Both directly and indirectly, companies, foundations and interest groups increasingly are creating journalism themselves. They are doing so, mainly, because now they … can. There are no longer any barriers that protect who can be a journalist or who can be a publisher.
Group presentation: Students imagine a non-journalism-related business or agency that creates its own news operation.

READINGS


Joseph Lichterman, “The 100-year-old Brookings Institution is Working to Turn Itself into more of a Digital Publisher,” NiemanLab, June 3, 2016.

“Knight News Challenge Awards $3.2 Million for 17 Ideas That Make Data Work for Communities,” Knight Foundation, January 26, 2016.


WEEK THIRTEEN (Nov. 28)

A look at important innovation trends abroad. Our global class will lead the discussion on innovation from their home countries.
Laura Hazard Owen, “Video News Isn’t Growing As Fast As You’d Think, and Other Surprising Findings from a New Global Survey,” June 14, 2016.


WEEK FOURTEEN (Dec. 5)

Presentations of final projects by students.