Mobile Media Best Practices: Lessons From 5 Years of *OR Magazine*

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Abstract

Digital publications now provide immersive interactive experiences for users of tablets and other mobile media devices. The ever-changing technology challenges educators to adapt curricula to better prepare students for an uncertain future. This article chronicles the creation of award-winning *OR Magazine* at University of Oregon, which was acknowledged by Adobe in 2011 as the first student-produced digital magazine for the iPad. It explores best practices for establishing communities of practice within student work teams and for inspiring innovation.

Keywords

mobile media, journalism, iPad, tablet, digital magazine, education

Journalism and mass communication programs continually confront the question of how to address rapid technological change. The challenges are both philosophical and financial. Innovation occurs at a pace that can make hardware obsolete within a year and require software updates every few months. Not to mention requirements for infrastructural resources and systems maintenance.

Philosophically, members of the Academy continue to debate whether the "technology race" is even a worthy endeavor. A familiar refrain from traditionalists is "technology will come and go, and we shouldn't waste our time and resources chasing it. Liberal arts education should stick to its core focus, which is challenging students to think in an ever-changing world." Newcomers can be inclined to remain silent, lest they call their credibility as true scholars into question and bear the wrath of being labeled "technologists."

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Yet, the rapid adoption of smartphones, tablets, and other mobile media technology has proved to be a game-changer. Students no longer need to wait for institutions to fund innovation or settle technology debates. They come to class with devices in their pockets and backpacks capable of producing high-definition video and sound that rival major television networks—and with the ability to share what they make in an instant. YouTube has more than 1 billion users and reports that 300 hr of video are uploaded every minute. The number of people using the service increases 50% year over year (YouTube, 2015).

Among U.S. teens, 78% own cell phones, and nearly half (47%) of them own smartphones. That equates to 37% of all teens owning smartphones, up from just 23% in 2011. One in four teens (23%) owns a tablet computer (Pew Internet Research, 2013). The exponential growth of mobile devices becomes clearer when you consider that Apple sold 25 times more Central Processing Unit (CPU) transistors during the weekend it launched the iPhone 6 than were in all PCs on earth in 1995 (Diamandis, 2014).

In the early days of the Internet, there were valid concerns about a measurable "digital divide" (Norris, 2001). Broadband access and computer ownership still lags in rural communities and neighborhoods with high concentrations of people of color (Pew Internet Research, 2014). However, mobile devices are leveling the playing field by democratizing Internet access in ways that were unimaginable just a decade ago. It is estimated that the number of people online will have jumped from 1.8 billion in 2010 to 5 billion globally by 2020 (Diamandis, 2014). Yet, it is not uncommon for school districts and their principals to ban open possession on smartphones on school premises (Barkam & Moss, 2012).

As media educators, we cannot afford to ignore nor underestimate the societal significance of mobile media technology as a worthy area for academic research and pedagogical practice. The choice is to guide students in maximizing the educational benefit of these devices or risk that their greater potential will go untapped.

In this essay, I reflect on how a commitment to innovation led us to create *OR Magazine*, acknowledged by Adobe in 2011 as the first student-produced magazine for the iPad using their Digital Publishing Suite software (Reimold, 2014). A year earlier, we offered one of the first classes on content creation for tablets a week before iPads were available through retailers. Now in its fifth year, *OR Magazine's* 2014 edition was awarded a Gold Crown, the Columbia Scholastic Press Association's (CSPA) highest honor, and has received 17 Gold Circle awards for individual excellence over the past few years.

I will share how we launched the course, what we have learned, and how our program has evolved. In addition, I will address how we have shared that knowledge through outreach programs in diverse and socioeconomically challenged communities.

Scholars need only look to theorists like Dewey (1933, 1944), Piaget and Warden (1926), and Vygotsky (1987) to affirm the value of experience-based learning. The concept of learning by doing has an even older tradition. Throughout antiquity, artists and artisans taught young apprentices their time-honored trade secrets.

Lave and Wenger (1991) later advanced the theoretical term *situated-learning* to describe the process by which authentic experiences are acknowledged as essential for deeper learning through social interaction. However, these theorists re-envisioned the master–student relationship of old in more contemporary terms, with a circular rather than one-way view of learning. The distinction acknowledges that students have much to contribute to the learning process.

Wenger (1998) reframed their construct as *communities of practice* to best describe how teams collaborate and negotiate power when working together. It acknowledges the tensions that can arise when newcomers attempt to innovate a practice. The establishment can view new ideas and methods as a threat to the status quo. It is an appropriate construct for looking at mobile media and its disruptive force within media education.

Our odyssey into teaching mobile media at the University of Oregon (UO) began with a *Wall Street Journal* report I read in 2010 stating that Apple was developing a new tablet device. The article also mentioned that Harper Collins intended to add value to eBooks by producing videos that would take readers behind-the-scenes into an author's process. The potential of having someone like David Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code*, take readers on a tour of the Vatican as he develops characters was compelling. Colleagues and I sensed this new device could lead a sea change in how media is consumed. To address the fast pace of innovation, our journalism school has a mechanism for fast-tracking experimental courses. With a green light from our dean and associate dean, we launched J408-Mobile Media Production during our spring quarter that year with 16 undergraduate students. No one in the room had physically held an iPad because they were not available in stores until a few days later.

To attract the most talented and committed students, we intentionally scheduled the course to meet Friday mornings at 8:00 a.m., and it required instructor consent. Four faculty members volunteered their time to support the effort, and each mentored teams consisting of four students.

A project of this nature counters traditional pedagogical practices. We needed to embrace the fact that as digital natives, some of our students would know more than we did about how to approach working with this new technology. A significant body of scholarly literature addresses learner-centered teaching (Doyle, 2011; Nanney, 2004; Weimer, 2013). Generally, the term pertains to creating a classroom climate that addresses students' intrinsic interests and welcomes their contributions. This can include engaging students in leading discussions and suggesting assignments. We ventured a step further by welcoming what I refer to as *student-generated learning*. As an example, by Week 2 a team of our students discovered how to layer PDF files to mimic the interactive functionality of mobile apps, without needing knowledge of coding. Wenger (1998) noted how through close coordination and synergy communities of practice can stumble upon innovations.

To operationalize our efforts, we reached out to Portland-based publishing firms within our region. Timber Press, Dark Horse Comics, and Beyond Words were among the companies that signed on to our experiment. They provided content, and worked with our student teams to create prototype iPad apps.

The iPad features a larger version of the touchscreen interface that Apple had introduced 3 years earlier in the iPhone, so we knew the experience would not be completely foreign. With no textbooks to guide our instruction, we enlisted the support of several innovators to engage with our students via Skype, including Jennifer Brook who led the design team for the *New York Times*'s first iPad app, and Josh Clark, author of *TapWorthy: Designing Great iPhone Apps*. Their input allowed us to explore topics that were new to our curriculum, such as user experience and touchscreen navigation.

From these experts, we discovered that while laptop users tend to hunch over their keyboards, tablet users are more likely to consume media in a reclining position. Another insight was that smartphones are highly personal devices, while tablets are better suited for shared activity such as game play. Working together, we were successful in providing our media partners with interactive prototypes that functioned well on iPads.

In 2011, Adobe announced development of its Digital Publishing Suite. Building it as an addition to InDesign, the software would allow publishers to create interactive magazines with such features as flip-through photo galleries, embedded videos, and 360-degree view imagery. I requested and received beta stage access for our students. During our 10-week spring quarter, a new team of 16 undergraduates created the first edition of *OR Magazine*. Unbeknownst to us, it was the first of its kind.

Our pedagogical approach for the magazine was informed by my dissertation study of the award-winning scholastic journalism program at Palo Alto High School in Northern California (Madison, 2012). More than 500 of its 1,800 students are engaged in journalism and media arts, producing nine different publications. They include a newspaper, a news website, three feature magazines, a sports magazine, a yearbook, and a daily three camera newscast—all led by students. The program's young editors and managers have well-established rituals for passing the baton from one leadership team to another each year.

To ensure continuity with our new publication, I determined that two sessions a week was a preferable format for the production of a magazine. Reaching out to other faculty for recommendations, I sought to recruit a mix of our school's best editors, writers, photojournalists, videographers, and designers. Any student who had completed basic prerequisite coursework was eligible to apply. However, we publicized that the selection process would be competitive.

Unlike Palo Alto High School's legacy publications, our new digital magazine marked the formation of a new *community of practice*. There were no established conventions or leaders to emulate. Esther Wojcicki, the Palo Alto program's "matriarch," advised us to fill that void by taking steps to create a climate of genuine student ownership around the project. It was essential that they be empowered to take the lead.

We established a need to fill key leadership positions that included two co-editors, a creative director, a photo editor, a multimedia editor, a copy editor, a communications manager, and a staff of writers and designers. Students had an opportunity to stand before their peers and state why they were qualified for a position, and to share examples of their portfolio work.

At the next class session, students voted by secret ballot to elect their leadership team. From this point on, the publication was placed in their hands. My job was to guide from the sidelines, remind them of deadlines, and support mediation of any altercations. With our communications manager taking the lead, I contributed to securing additional experts to engage with us via Skype. From the front of the room, our co-editors led the class in selecting a name. Desirous of capturing the spirit and uniqueness of our region, the team settled on *OR Magazine*.

The leadership selection process continues to be a foundational element to the publication's success. Once the co-editors assume their roles, a realization sweeps over the class—this is their publication, not mine. Concerns about grades fade into the background. They become a unified whole, committed to challenging the conventions commonly associated with magazines. Tackling the same problems confronting creative teams at Condé Nast's *Wired Magazine* and *Martha Stewart Living*, which at the time were among the few innovators working within Adobe's beta program, inspired them.

Wenger (1991) more specifically defined *communities of practice* as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly," acknowledging the power of the relationships when teams work closely together.

Students began to supplement our class sessions with a significant amount of teamwork outside of class. And it continues to happen, year after year. The production nights go later, and their bonds grow stronger. In the final stretch of our 10-week term, staff members are living in the computer labs, and napping on one another's couches between deadlines. Despite the unpredictable nature of working with a software that was still in its testing phase, the first issue was completed with minimal complications.

Interactive features greatly enhance the user experience of reading mobile media publications. In 5 years of producing *OR Magazine*, our students have created several memorable covers. The 2012 edition's cover story features an image of a menacing-looking mixed martial arts (MMA) athlete wearing boxing gloves, with a caption that reads, "Tap at Your Own Risk." Once touched, the image comes to life, giving the startling sense that the subject is punching toward your face. The 2014 edition's cover story features a Breedlove guitar, handcrafted from wood only found in and around Oregon. Touching any of the single guitar strings sets it into a slow vibrating motion and the note is heard.

An early innovation was rethinking the production process. To achieve optimal interactivity in each publication, our students disregard traditional workflows. Rather than have designers join late in the process, they are present at every phase—including going out into the field during stories. Often designers will envision or spot an opportunity in the field involving an angle or perspective that might otherwise be missed.

One student designer's vision turned an otherwise static shot of a UO track star into a 360-degree image that can be spun around by touch. Yet, the teams are mindful to not allow style to overshadow substance. They remain meticulous about the writing and have been known to revise a draft a dozen times to get it right.

As we launch the production of the 5th annual edition of *OR Magazine*, Adobe has announced significant changes to its digital publishing platform, and a new beta phase program. We could not resist the temptation to experiment again. We intend to produce future editions for both tablets and smartphones, broadly widening the publication's reach.

Other industry trends are reshaping publishing as we have known it. The future of mobile media, in terms of digital publishing, is moving away from the model of the monthly magazine. Magazine apps will serve more as a portal for articles that may be published with greater frequency. *Fast Company* is among the first magazines to venture into this new terrain. Facebook and Apple are entering the arena with new initiatives.

We are also committed to contributing to future generations of journalistic storytellers. In spring 2014, a team of *OR Magazine* and other UO journalism students facilitated a weeklong Digital Skills Workshop boot camp at Roosevelt High School in Portland, Oregon. At Roosevelt, 84% of students receive free or reduced lunch, and it ranks among Oregon's poorest high schools (Parks, 2014). Using iPod Touch devices donated by our journalism school, 12 Roosevelt students were empowered to produce video profiles of unsung heroes in their own community. We had a separate documentary crew record video highlights from the week and create online learning modules, complete with a lesson plan, that teachers and students everywhere can use to replicate or adapt to curriculum. The modules are available at DigitalSkillsWorkshop.com.

The digital tools are becoming more accessible, opening new opportunities for previously untold stories to find audiences. These tools potentially democratize and diversify media in unprecedented ways. New technologies and ways of shaping communities of practice will continue to evolve, and journalism and mass communication educators must be willing to meet the challenge.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Author Biography

Ed Madison's multifaceted career began as a high school intern at the CBS television affiliate in Washington, DC, during the Watergate scandal. Shortly after graduating from Emerson College in Boston, at age 22, he became a founding producer at CNN. He holds a PhD from the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon, where he is an assistant professor. He is also an Apple Distinguished Educator. His current book is *Newsworthy—Cultivating Critical Thinkers, Readers, and Writers in Language Arts Classrooms*, from Teachers College Press – Columiba University.