On Campus

Texting, One, Two

By
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With so much gloom coming out of the news business these days, panelists of a recent lecture on the state of the media industry tried something a little different.

At the annual "Changing Media Landscape" lecture, held November 11 at the journalism school, audience members were not only allowed to use laptops and mobile phones during the talk, they were encouraged to do so. Packed into a standing-room-only auditorium, the attendees, rather than queuing up at a microphone as in years past, were instructed to send questions to panelists via e-mail or by text message. PowerPoint slides were banned (too archaic), and the program was aired live on Mogulus.com, an online broadcast platform that launched in 2007.

The event was headlined by prominent Web journalists, including Sewell Chan, editor of the *New York Times*'s local news blog City Room; Jacob Weisberg, chairman and editor in chief of the online magazine *Slate*; Adriano Farano, executive editor of an online European current-affairs magazine, *Cafebabel.com*; and David Cohn '08JRN, founder of Spot.Us, a site where donors can fund journalistic projects. J-school Dean of Student Affairs Sreenath Sreenivasan '93JRN, who heads the new-media department, was the moderator.

"New media and traditional media are diverging fairly radically after a long period of relatively peaceful coexistence," said Weisberg, who, until recently, believed that print journalists could acquire Web skills fairly quickly. Now he feels that "people who haven't been transitioned aren't going to make it."

Underscoring the palpable sense of fear was a fifth panelist, Erica Smith, a Web designer at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, who created a blog that tracks layoffs in the print journalism industry. Recently, her site, Paper Cuts, tallied more than 15,000

jobs cut from newspapers in 2008, including 10 from the Bay Area News Group, 45 from the *Poughkeepsie Journal*, and 110 from the Orange County Register. "The layoff thing really affected my paper a couple of times in the past few months," Smith said. "Really, I should have been laid off."

Launched in 1912, a year after founder Joseph Pulitzer's death, the journalism school offered its first new-media course, Cyberspace Reporting, in 1994. Today, all students get new-media training. In September, students reporting on a visit to campus by Senators John McCain and Barack Obama '83CC filed stories on a blog and via Twitter, a social messaging system that allows users to post messages, or "tweets," up to 140 characters long.

What would Joseph Pulitzer think? In the "Pulitzer Centennial Lecture," delivered in 2004, Dean Nicholas Lemann outlined the publisher's years-long quest to create a school of journalism. "Pulitzer did not envision a school that would train people in how to operate a newspaper, but, rather, a school that would, in a way then unspecified, adapt the University's ideal of a liberal education specially for future journalists," he said.

Amid the decline of Pulitzer's preferred medium — newspapers — his vision is proving more flexible than perhaps even he imagined.

"Journalism is a process, not a product," Cohn of Spot.Us said from the dais, arguing that experimentation is the key to the kind of innovation necessary to sustain the industry. "We should think of it as research and development. Journalism will survive on the shoulders of its failures."

And indeed, despite the progress of the past century, there was at least one failure that night. One of the last two questions from the audience came from a young woman, who stood up with a mobile phone in her hand and said, "I just want to tell you, technology doesn't work. I tried to text my question, and it didn't go through."

After she read the question from her handheld, moderator Sreenivasan told the crowd that they had just witnessed a new way of communicating. "I think that's a first, reading the text message to the audience," he said.

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