Journalism Training In The Digital Era

Views From the Field

By Bill Ristow

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The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world. The Center provides information, builds networks, conducts research, and highlights the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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Following a 23-year career at the Seattle Times, where he held positions including metro editor and features editor, he has trained professional journalists and students in Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Ukraine, Bosnia & Herzegovina and, as a Fulbright Scholar, in Ghana. He has authored five other reports for CIMA: *Sword and Shield: Self-Regulation and International Media* and *Under Attack: Practicing Journalism in a Dangerous World*, both published in 2009, *Cash for Coverage: Bribery of Journalists Around the World* (2010), *Independent Media in Exile* (2011), and *The New Gatekeepers: Controlling Information in the Internet Age* (2013).

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Methodology and Acknowledgments

This report is based largely on interviews with top officials of media development organizations, trainers and project implementers working on the front lines, and academic experts in media development. The author thanks these individuals for their insights and cooperation: Jerome Aumente, Rutgers University, School of Communication and Information (emeritus); James Breiner, Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico; Patrick Butler, International Center for Journalists; David Klatell, Columbia University, Graduate School of Journalism; Dru Menaker, IREX; Peter Mwesige, Ugandan journalist and former chair of the journalism school at Uganda's Makerere University; Anne Nelson, Columbia University, School of International and Public Affairs; Johan Romare, Fojo Media Institute, Sweden; Marjorie Rouse, Internews; Lisa Schnellinger, media trainer and consultant; Tara Susman-Peña, Internews; Maureen Taylor, University of Oklahoma; Terry Thielen, IREX.

Executive Summary

Data boot camps, where once there were training workshops. Hackathons instead of editorial coaching sessions. Tips on tweets in place of classes in covering breaking news stories. Infographics and factboxes? Think "data visualization" instead.

It's not just the wording that has changed in the universe of international media development. Reflecting the tectonic changes in the media industry at large, the ground has violently shifted in media development work, as well. Digital tools are everywhere, the word "innovation" is sprinkled throughout requests for proposals from donors and press releases from media development implementers. Media developers now need to think like new media entrepreneurs. At the same time, resources are shifting.

The 2012 edition of CIMA's "*Empowering Independent Media*" report noted that one result of the explosion of digital technology "is a move away from traditional journalism training, long a core component of media development. One USAID media expert estimated that in the 1990s, about 80 to 90 percent of media development funding was spent on journalism and media business training. Today, he estimates that training makes up only about 50 percent of media development projects." The rapid change of focus represented an admirable effort by donors and implementers alike to avoid the mistakes of Western media organizations that failed to understand what was happening to their world–and, more importantly, their business model– until it was too late for many of them. But the shift was certainly accelerated by the events of the Arab Spring movement, often characterized by Western news coverage as "Twitter revolutions" or "Facebook revolutions." Suddenly, it became essential to do things differently in media development.

Terry Thielen, a senior technical officer at IREX, one of the largest media development organizations, worked for years out in the field. When she joined IREX in its Washington, DC, offices in early 2012, she remembers, "it hit me in the face; everything has this new media, digital media, social media component to it. There's no media-development RFA [request for applications] that doesn't contain some technology element, so far as I can see." Nobody thinks there's anything wrong with media development projects going through an evolution of focus. And pretty much everyone believes there is imaginative, valuable work going on throughout the world, helping journalists, citizen journalists, and civil society organizations alike tap into the powers of Internet-based communication.

But a significant number of people whose work is doing media development on the ground, or who have specialized in studying it from the vantage point of universities, raise cautionary questions. Among them: Are

we properly tailoring the work to the wildly varied technological environments of the developing world? Are we mistakenly assuming that the problems Western media have faced are the same ones facing the media elsewhere? Are we being dazzled by the "shiny toys" of digital media, offering things that aren't really useful in local contexts?

And especially: Are we placing platform too far ahead of content, and running a serious risk of shortchanging critically important work in support of journalism skills and business training for media organizations?

Jerome Aumente, professor emeritus at the Rutgers University School of Communication and Information and who has been involved in training, research, and consulting with media development organizations since 1989, has a measured view about balancing the newer and traditional training approaches.

"The mix has to be there," he says. "What you must do is line it up with the realities of the country you're in and calibrate it to make it match up. There's no point in teaching higher-end technology to a region that is still basically newspaper focused.

"Part of the problem now," he concludes, "is not to deprive a country of the promise of the new media–but also to put it into the appropriate context."

To address these issues, media development donors and organizations should:

- Carefully analyze the broader enabling environment and conditions surrounding each intervention. This includes not only the legal and business climate, but also the links to and possible synergies with other development projects or programs. Also important is the level and nature of local demand for the work that is being proposed. For example, while journalists are often quite eager to be trained, particularly in the new tools of the digital age, it is important to know whether they will be able to use the training in their workplace, whether the management of their news organizations supports the training, or, more ominously, if such training could put the journalists at risk of being targeted by a hostile regime.

- Focus a similar diagnosis on the more specific "media ecosystem" and technological conditions of the country. Efforts need to be designed and tailored for a particular environment, including its ability to support specific digital techniques and approaches.

Technical conditions vary widely–and often are far different from those in the West. A "one size fits all" approach is rarely successful.

- Maintain a strong, calculated emphasis both on core journalism and on support for media business sustainability, even when the focus is on training for digital platforms. To make it easier to analyze what mix of solutions works best, media development organizations should disclose the breakdown of projects by areas of emphasis through more transparent, periodic reporting.

- Invest more in research, especially at the front end of projects. Universities could make an invaluable contribution to improving our knowledge of what programs work best under what conditions.

- Rigorously evaluate the new types of projects. Many people call for stronger evaluations overall, but they are especially important with the evolving digital-oriented work, because lessons learned at the beginning will have the greatest impact on future projects.

The Rise of Digital Media Training

The modern era of international journalism training and media development was born in a revolutionary event: the implosion of the long-entrenched Soviet empire in the late 1980s.

This historic occurrence created a rich new target area for Western governments and private media-aid groups who wanted to help a bumper crop of newly independent nations follow a path toward democracy–in part, by developing strong media voices.

Experienced print, radio, and television reporters and editors, many from the United States, flocked to Eastern and Central Europe, and as time moved on, to countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. They taught all the basic skills of journalism: interviewing, ethics, accuracy, editing, TV and radio, photography, newsroom management.

This was the norm for nearly two decades, until another revolutionary event: the implosion of the long-entrenched advertising-based business model for Western news media in the early 2000s.

This second historic occurrence has created, mostly in the past five or six years, another rich new area of focus for governments and private aid groups who want to help journalists and citizen activists around the world–but this time by bringing them the new tools of digital and social media.

One way to see how the look of international journalism training and media development was transformed is to glance at a Web page where the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), one of the leading U.S. media-development organizations, lists current and past participants in its Knight International Journalism Fellowship program.[1]

The Knight Fellows program has operated since 1994, but there are only seven Fellows listed from earlier than 2007, and the titles of their fellowship projects all read the same:

- "Nigeria: Journalism Training."

- "Mongolia: Journalism Training."

- "Czech Republic: Journalism Training."

Jump forward to the most recent year, and project titles have a distinctly different sound:

- "Brazil: Launch a Digital Map that Uses Open Data to Monitor the Amazon."

- "Nigeria: Increasing Citizen Engagement with Health News."

- "Sub-Saharan Africa: Spurring Innovation and Experimentation in Newsrooms."

Likewise, the brief resumes of the pre-2007 fellows all describe traditional careers as reporters and editors in the United States. Now, the fellows sound like this: "a visual storyteller, who did groundbreaking work as a member of the interactive team at *The Guardian* in London" … "an environmental journalist and media trainer [from Brazil] who specializes in data-driven journalism" … "a consulting strategist on journalistic innovation for Google."
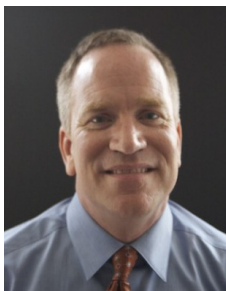
These Knight Fellowships are ICFJ's "flagship" program, **Patrick Butler**, ICFJ vice president for programs, says. The changes came in their 2009-2012 grant cycle, he said, with an acceleration in emphasizing "how the media is changing and how we can play a role." Now, with the 2013-2015 cycle, the fellowships "are all digital."[2]

The move to digital also has changed the content and approach of many of the programs, moving from training of journalists, which Butler says is now "often a very small part" of the projects, to a broader set of interventions. Today, in addition to training, Knight Fellows also do what Butler calls "engineering work," helping to create new tools and new platforms for journalists, and citizen journalists–importing some developed in the West, but also working together with partners to develop locally appropriate tools.

Patrick Butler

The buzzwords of this new style of work are decidedly technological. Just as ICFJ programs have included data "boot camps" in Africa, the international media-support giant Internews has sponsored "hackathons" to generate technology-based solutions for social problems in Burma. In 2011, in response to the "new dynamics in the media environment," Internews created its own Center for Innovation and Learning, with the goal "to support, capture, and connect local experts with global audiences to connect more folks with more information."[3]

IREX has published, in English and Arabic, a *Digital Journalism Trainers' Manual*, which it describes as an outline, to be used by trainers, with "lesson plans, tips and techniques for the practice of digital journalism."[4] And by no

means is this just a focus of the large international media development providers. ABC International Development, for example, an arm of the public Australian Broadcasting Corporation, sponsors an initiative in the Solomon Islands that, among other things, helps local media develop social-media strategies, including how to build and use Facebook pages.[5]

That aspect of training–helping traditional media change business models with new distribution platforms–is an important part of the new framework. "We're seeing a lot more of that," says **Terry Thielen**, a senior technical officer with IREX. Program elements aimed, for example, at helping get content out on Facebook, smartphones, and websites are "being incorporated as a rule of thumb," she says.[6]

While all of this would seem to signal an important and far-reaching change in the content and approaches to media training, some feel the evolution isn't happening fast enough.

Terry Thielen

"Journalism businesses and journalists generally, and I would say also training organizations, have been slow to realize the potential power and advantages of engaging social media," says **James Breiner**, who has trained journalists in China and throughout Latin America and currently works at Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico. He says the big implementing organizations need to make available more people "who have the ability to take new developments in communication technology and put them into play, and turn them into tools that journalists can use–that anyone can use."[7]

James Breiner

Breiner, who started his media development work as a Knight Fellow in 2006, also points to what he considers a necessary shift in the style and delivery of training. "The unit of training we used to think about is going the way of the unit of journalism we used to use–the story," he says. That "old" unit of training was a traditional course or workshop, with a particular length and structure that, Breiner argues, was usually longer than what most people want.

Instead, he says, "the unit of training may now be a five-minute video, or a three-minute video, on how to hack this particular problem." And maybe, he suggests, media-development organizations should be putting

together large databases of these little units, letting users anywhere in the world reassemble them in the order and length they prefer to construct their own training.

In addition to a change in the content of training, the methodologies of delivery of that training are also changing. The Poynter Institute's online News University project, supported by the Knight Foundation, is one example of the evolving delivery methods. News U offers distance-learning classes on traditional topics (a curriculum on business and economics reporting, for example) but has an increasingly strong emphasis on digital tools.[8]

Lisa Schnellinger

Lisa Schnellinger, a veteran media trainer and consultant around the world since 1996, when the Internet was not yet a significant factor, calls it "phenomenally wonderful" to be able to work over long distances, as she did in her last job, as senior adviser to UPI for development of UPI Next, a mentoring program for writers. Today, she said, "there are opportunities to help journalists in ways we never could before."[9]

Indeed, for Internews, "looking at different and better ways to train people," including distance learning, has been "a bigger and more intentional shift" than training people elsewhere to use new digital platforms, says **Marjorie Rouse**, senior vice president of that organization.[10]

Marjorie Rouse

As the types of training have changed, media-development implementers are choosing different sorts of people to provide the training. There is greater emphasis on younger trainers with proven digital skills, of course. But it goes beyond that. Joyce Barnathan, ICFJ's president, wrote earlier this year about the new focus of the Knight Fellowships program, to "foster a culture of news innovation," with "some of the most talented global media entrepreneurs" as Knight Fellows.[11]

ICFJ's Butler explains that while in the past the goal was to have "great journalists" as fellows, those journalists didn't always "have the skills to develop innovative projects." Now, he said, "the people who we need to lead these projects are very entrepreneurial." They include fellows who have a proven track record of fund-raising that they can bring to their Knight Fellowship and draw in additional partners.

Johan Romare

For **Johan Romare**, international director of Sweden's Fojo Media Institute, it is more challenging than ever to find the best individuals to do this work. "We are constantly struggling to find the right people as trainers today. It was much easier 10 years ago," he says, when they simply looked for an experienced specialist in some aspect of journalism. Now, they want to find people "who are more future-oriented in what they bring–and they are more difficult to find. A lot of people are without any real ideas to do this."[12]

One final change in orientation: In many cases, the new approach to media-development work is aimed at people who are–as is more and more the case in the West–not part of traditional media outlets at all. Part of the internal conversation at Fojo, said Romare, includes "Who are we training? Who would we like to capacitate, to bring the craft and values of journalism forward? It's not necessarily just the people in the newsroom. It's not a black and white matter anymore" about who is a journalist, or, for example, who is an activist.

Dru Menaker

Most organizations have variations of the same, still-evolving, approach about whom they work with. At ICFJ, Butler says, the majority of projects still involve traditional media organizations, "but a lot of it is about citizen engagement in the news. We have plenty of 'citizen journalism' efforts, but we still try to connect them to traditional organizations," in part to emphasize the importance of journalistic standards.

Dru Menaker, senior media adviser at IREX, notes that the lines have blurred around who is a content producer: It could be a media outlet, but it also could be a civil society organization. IREX works with both, and in doing so, it wants "to embrace the potential of having citizen journalists–and citizen journalists are not meant to be professional," she says. In this context IREX project workers strive "to instill values–about accuracy, about not provoking conflict."[13]

Potential Pitfalls in the Rush to Digital Media

The groundbreaking work in digital media training is transforming the landscape of media development, often in ways that have strong potential to make a difference for local citizens, and to help media organizations navigate a turbulent time of change. The media development field is displaying new energy, a valuable new focus on innovation and experimentation, and in many cases, a laudable decision to develop and use trainers from local regions rather than the United States

Not a single person interviewed for this report, and not a single document or position paper reviewed, questioned the importance of this evolving approach to media development. Indeed, anyone familiar with the crisis of journalism in the developed world would certainly understand why.

And yet, experts intimately familiar with media development, trainers with long experience on the ground, and even some of the leaders of media-development organizations do raise serious concerns about the shift to a strongly digital focus. Despite the many examples of imaginative, effective new programs using digital media tools, a number of lessons are emerging about how to best use these tools and how to ensure that they are contributing to the overall goals of media development.

The issues can be grouped in these broad areas, with overlaps among them:

1. **In shifting to a strongly digital approach, the media-development community can be too quick to assume that the problems journalism has faced in developed countries exist everywhere else.**

David Klatell, a professor and chair of international studies at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, notes the "unwinding of the business model" in the West, where the public no longer has to rely on the so-called legacy media, because it now has nearly unlimited options for information. So in the West, Klatell conjectures, 98 percent of the battle for established media involves how to compete in this radically changed world, where people have an abundance of information choices.[14]

David Klatell

"Our urge is to go out to the rest of the world and say, 'Let us help you avoid being run over by this steamroller that we were run over by,'" Klatell said. "The problem is, abundance [of information choices] is not the issue in many of these places. We talk about

the wolf is at our door, but that's not the wolf at the door in much of the Third World." Instead, he said, it is old-fashioned things–press censorship, illiteracy, bad economics, poor infrastructure.

"In much of the world–the majority of the world, by population–the general operating context for journalism is improving, not degrading," he said. He ticks off the indicators: literacy, connectivity, advertising–all growing. "Legacy journalism is actually rising in quite a lot of the world, and the demand for information is rising in a lot of the world. So the big challenge is to create a market for journalism, not for digital."

Jerome Aumente, professor emeritus at the Rutgers University School of Communication and Information, who has been involved in direct training work, research, and consulting with media-development organizations since 1989, raises an additional caution. "I don't think we've found a good solution to deal with the balance of traditional media and new media here in the U.S., and I don't think we can export it until we do," he says, adding that there are still too many unresolved questions–retooling the business plan, who do you hire, what skills do they need. "I'm not sure we've gotten far enough down the road here, quite frankly."[1]

Jerome Aumente

2. **The new digital-focused work needs to be tailored more carefully to the vastly different technological situations in different regions.**

"A lot of the media training organizations, NGOs, funders have been very quick to adopt what amounts to a broad philosophy of digital training, and not so fast or skilled at thinking through what specifically does that mean," Klatell said. For example, there are "cultural impediments to things like user-generated content that are easy to espouse, but not so easy to implement in some of these local areas. You almost need to develop customized training for a specific country, or locale, or even city."

Schnellinger believes there can be too much of a "one size fits all" approach by media-development funders, sometimes without considering the local context. "Sure," she says, "what journalist isn't going to show up for a workshop about Facebook–it's sexy!" But is it really what's needed in that country? She describes working with an organization that wanted a strong Facebook component in a project–and members of the organization's staff were shocked when she showed them a report showing how little penetration Facebook had in that area.

Indeed, Facebook penetration was a strong 49.9 percent of the population in the United States at the end of March 2012 (the latest figures available), and 28.5 percent throughout Europe, according to one major compiler of statistics. But in Asia it was 5 percent, and in Africa, 3.9 percent.[16] (And considering the stronger online environment in South Africa, where penetration was more like 11 percent at the same time, the figures for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa would be even lower.[17])

"This is not a blanket condemnation of these tools. They're great tools," Schnellinger says. "But it's a very fine line–you don't want to encourage bad habits. If you are not understanding of the many people who don't have access, it leaves them out of the conversation."

Klatell describes some of what he's seen as "a bit like selling microwave ovens to people who don't have electricity. There's an ecosystem of journalism, and in many parts of the world, the ecosystem is not yet robust enough to benefit, on any long-term basis, from all this digital training. Ideas like community based journalism, user-generated content–they work in some places, but they require a robust infrastructure backbone, a government that isn't spying on everyone, a nationwide agreement on the norms of online content." These things just don't exist in a lot of these countries, he argues.

Clearly there are countries where the conditions for digital media are far more healthy than others. This would include the "BRICS" countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). Breiner, whose work has been in China and Latin America, sees the need for increased focus on how journalists can use social media to engage with audiences, and how to use mobile media in the field. With the emerging power of smartphones, he points out, "the so-called backpack journalist of five or six years ago is becoming the reality." "In countries that are rapidly deploying the necessary infrastructure, like Brazil, and to some extent Mexico and India, the demand for better digital gathering of news, production of news, distribution of news tends to follow along," Klatell says. In those areas, "you're seeing some successes" from the new approaches to media development, although those are still "not overwhelming, not comprehensive, not necessarily long-term."

Anne Nelson teaches at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and is a specialist in international media development who has consulted for major funding organizations, including authoring reports for CIMA and for the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA). "It is clear that Internet

Anne Nelson

access can be a powerful tool in enhancing transparency, but critical indicators such as literacy and rural electrification are often overlooked in the digital euphoria," she writes in a post on PBS's MediaShift.[18]

Nelson sees a potential social issue here, as well. It is "an enormous waste," in her view, for the media-development community to focus too heavily on digital platforms "where there's not the enabling environment to support it."[19] In many developing countries, she notes, there's an urban elite with good access to broadband. If your work tends to be reaching mainly those people, there's a risk that "you're adding yet another layer to the privileged. I'm not saying it's a bad thing, just that you're leaving out these large masses of people who don't have broadband."

3. **Shifting approaches too much toward digital media projects raises the risk of reducing training in traditional journalism skills, which is still badly needed.**

"The funding is moving away from the skills that are essential to serious content creation, and toward creation of platforms," Nelson believes. And that, she says, can lead to "frivolous content, even erroneous content." She's concerned that "people have lost their sense of how to talk about the principles of journalism. It's as though the base of the iceberg has melted."

Schnellinger puts it this way: "I'm an early adopter and a huge fan of digital media and have been telling colleagues for literally 20 years that they needed to wake up. But I resist the swooning infatuation at the other end of the spectrum. These are transformative tools that are a huge boon to our work. But they're not a substitute for journalistic skills."

Romare, from Sweden's Fojo Media Institute, expresses strong feelings about this. "There is a risk that the platform becomes the objective, so to speak," he says. "Especially if you speak to donors and look at the donor agenda since the Arab Spring, there has been a tendency to overemphasize the power of the new social media."

Romare says he has seen numerous specific examples of this overemphasis–"many, many times from donors: from Sida [the Swedish International Development Agency], from USAID, from the European Commission side, the UNDP [United Nations Development Program] and other UN agencies." These donors, he said, "have expressed that ICT [Information and Communication Technology] is what they're interested in–and this is of course because this is what they've been told to focus on" by their governing bodies.

The Arab Spring example shows up repeatedly. Widely touted in the moment by Western media as "the Twitter revolutions," the much-documented use of social media in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere is often credited (or blamed) for accelerating the media-development community's expansion of digital and social media training.[20]

Romare cites an anecdote that exemplifies what he sees as a misplaced focus. "Last year I listened to an activist from Egypt, a blogger, who had been active in Tahrir Square, and she said that now, with the new regime in Egypt, everyone had focused so much on bloggers, YouTube clips. That was important, but the real institutions that matter now are the state media. These were the bastions that need to be transformed."

His conclusion: "The platform is not the solution." There has been, he suggests, "an over belief in the power of social media as the platform." What matters Romare said, is the content.

Leaders of the major organizations say they're confident that skills training remains sufficiently strong. "Media development requires a multidimensional approach," said IREX's Menaker. "We're always going to work on those core skills as part of what we do." Thielen, also with IREX, said that while the funders she works with "definitely want to see some sort of creativity in the use of digital, I don't think they're asking for that in lieu of basic journalism skill development, where it's needed."

Butler, talking about the new iteration of ICFJ's Knight Fellowships, repeatedly stresses that the work is all in the context of the bedrock skills, and "quality journalism infuses it all."

"But clearly," he goes on, "we're doing less in the way of basic journalism, such as teaching how to do interviews, through the Knight Fellowships. If we were just continuing to do that, we would be ignoring this enormous shift in journalism. If we didn't do this, we'd be among those people–and there are those–who really resist any change. We think there is more of an opportunity than a threat."

Still, he acknowledges that with the shifting tide of resources, it may be inevitable that there will be a decline in teaching the basic skills that are still badly needed in much of the world, and that, he says, is a concern: "There is a finite number of resources, and if more is going to this, less may be going to other things."

Breiner sees a trend toward "more funding for basic training and multimedia training" from international press organizations, pointing to the example of Poynter's News University. But others on the front lines can be frustrated by the way they see badly needed resources being used.

Peter Mwesige brings a particularly broad perspective to the discussion. A Ugandan journalist and former newspaper editor, he is also an academic (former chair of the journalism school at Uganda's Makerere University) familiar both with Western media (his Ph.D is from Indiana University) and with the media-development needs of East Africa, where he co-founded the African Centre for Media Excellence, a media support and training NGO.

Peter Mwesige

His own greatest frustration with the international media-development world comes when its practitioners fail to reflect what he calls "complementality"–or, as he puts it, "What can the mainstream media tap from social/digital media and vice versa?" He strongly believes in the power of social media and other digital tools, and that even in areas with limited broadband, they're useful–for example, by providing news tips.[21]

But he also strongly cautions media developers against going overboard in making the shift of emphasis.

"The excitement over social media/new media should be tempered by the realities of the ways that many Africans are consuming news," he said. "The traditional media still remain important. Donor-supported interventions should recognize the 'complementality' between new media and traditional media."

He cites a UNICEF program in Uganda titled Ureport, which polls Ugandan youth who are enrolled in the program on various public issues, using mobile phones and SMS messaging. Its mission is to inspire community and political action, and inform the public through various platforms. It is, Mwesige says, part of "the growing trend to support innovative ICT projects that enable citizens to express themselves on matters of governance and other public affairs."

This is all well and good–but it shouldn't be done in isolation, Mwesige says. "I am yet to see them exploit synergies with the mainstream media," he says of Ureport. "For instance, journalists could actually have been taught how to use these voices to come up with more compelling stories in the mainstream media on service delivery and other governance issues."

4. **The media-development community must resist what might best be characterized as the "sexiness factor."**

Different people have different terms for it. For Nelson, it is "digital euphoria." For Schnellinger, "swooning infatuation." Aumente, of Rutgers, warns of the "flavor of the month." Rouse, of Internews, when asked about the phenomenon, laughed: "the shiny toys," she said.

Maureen Taylor, professor and chair of strategic communication at the University of Oklahoma's journalism school and a specialist in evaluating media projects, objects to a "knee-jerk reaction of putting social media into everything. I understand the reason, but the impact is so small."

Maureen Taylor

"I find it kind of obnoxious," IREX's Thielen says, especially when "donors have this notion that if you use online and social media in your project, this is somehow the magic bullet for reaching masses and masses of people. I don't think this is necessarily true."

Aumente says he's seen something similar before–"way back when, when videotex and teletext first came on." That was in the technological dark ages of the 1970s, but he remembers the buzz: "It was like going to a religious event, it was going to restructure everything." That's something like what he sees in the excitement about the Internet and digital tools today.

Even Butler, whose Knight Fellowships have made some of the most aggressive and creative moves toward adopting digital media, acknowledges that "there are cases where the funders are taken up by the trends, by what's sexy at the moment, and you have to help them focus" on what would really work. Butler uses the Pulitzer-winning *New York Times* online project "Snowfall" as an example: "A mistake I sometimes see being made is people taking a program here that requires heavy broadband, such as data visualization, and say, 'Well, let's do that in Africa.' That's not going to work. Who's going to see that?" It's important, according to Butler, to push back against that allure and recognize region-specific technology and realities.

Schnellinger makes the same case more pointedly. She argues that donors sometimes include "really fatuous wording about 'social media' and 'innovation' in RFP's [requests for proposals], and this can result in just sort of superficial treatment" from the media-development implementers.

Tara Susman-Peña

Part of **Tara Susman-Peña**'s work at Internews, as director of research for the Media Map project (done by Internews in collaboration with the World Bank Institute), focuses on the past: How well the media-development community has carried out its mission. The other part focuses on the future: As senior research officer, one of her jobs is to evaluate Internews's innovation projects.

In a 2012 CIMA report based on the Media Map project, she warned about "techno-determinism." She observed that "innovation is the buzzword of the moment, and an over-enthusiasm for new technological developments [can mean that] donors and technologists may simply throw technology at a problem."[22] Today, she says, that can still be an issue with the new digitally focused projects. "A lot of it is unproven: 'This is cool, let's throw some money at it, throw some technology at it'," she says.[23]

She cites an Internews project, "social innovation camps" held in Bosnia and several other countries, as an example of the "over-enthusiasm" phenomenon.

Her Internews evaluation of the camps describes them this way: "Citizen empowerment and finding grassroots (often technological) solutions to social problems are core values permeating these events. All of these learning-focused, community-building events are taking place within a broader movement of people involved in tech startups, social entrepreneurship, crowdsourcing, and human-centered design."[24]

The camps were intense, two-day affairs, and their concept came from a popular trend in the tech world, sometimes known as hackathons or incubation labs. "Basically, these were a hackathon for social good, and our research showed a lot of problems with that approach," Susman-Peña says. Because the focus wasn't just about technology, she said, but about involving citizens in a collaborative effort, this particular trendy approach didn't work.[25]

"You can't just add technology and think everything is great," she said. "The people who go to the hackathons and camps that are so popular these days–they're great, everybody feels great, but what happens afterward?"

Rouse agrees that there can be "a lot of interest in the next new thing, and the next new thing generally is only part of the solution. Do people get overexcited sometimes about the technology as opposed to the content? Yes."

For her, "It's up to us to continue to advocate for the right balance–what we design, and how we design it." The discussions within the industry these days, she says, include "the shiny toys, and finding the balance," and she believes there are ways to influence the outcome–by thinking ahead. "The longer lead time we have, and the more we're able to do studies and reports that will inform the media development and donor community, and inform the trends, the better off we all are," she said.

IREX's Menaker, meanwhile, contends that it's important to put all this "digital euphoria" in some context. "There was a year or two when everyone got too excited about it, but that's over," she says. Yes, there have been missteps, but she adds, "at every stage of development work we make mistakes. We're just making different mistakes. We need to make the mistakes, and learn from them."

Author Bill Ristow training journalists in Uganda in 2010. (Photo by Theresa Morrow)

A Research Vacuum

There's widespread feeling in the media development world in general that not enough research is being done about what is needed where, and this certainly applies to the specific issue of how to balance digital vs. traditional journalism skills. "We need better embedding of research into everything we do," research specialist Susman-Peña says. And that can be hard–after all, "we're implementers; what we're really good at is implementation, so people want to charge off into the field."

She suggests that universities could do some of that research, but she says "a think tank or two" would be more effective. What she has in mind would bring together all kinds of stakeholders: academics, technologists, innovators from different countries. It would and should produce research, but in a very actionable form. The goal for her: "really try to shake things up."

Klatell's advice to the media-development community: "Spend much more time thinking not what you want to provide, but what the market wants and needs." Nelson strongly agrees. "The first thing you should do is you must define what you want to accomplish. That's a step that's too often missed," she said.

Nelson is passionate in her belief that the work of media development "needs to be better organized, analyzed, and researched." She thinks universities and think tanks should be producing this research, and for the most part, they're failing to do so. Partly, she acknowledges, this is because media-development aid is much newer than traditional areas such as agriculture or general economic development that have been studied extensively, so "it's early days to compare." At the same time, she argues that "we have barely built up the research capacity [on media issues] for the U.S., and then we mistakenly assumed these were the problems everywhere."[26]

In the area of digital training, she would like to see work from think tanks or university research centers to create "a better understanding of the Internet and how it plays out in different societies." We need to do a better job of understanding all the variations, she says, and academia "has really missed the boat" on this sort of research.

In a report for WAN-IFRA, "*Financially Viable Media in Emerging and Developing Markets*," Nelson raises a host of fascinating, nuanced questions about issues related to technology in different areas that relate to media development. For instance: In Africa, what research exists strongly suggests that "Internet use is not based on the personal computer but rather on access to public machines"–Internet cafes, schools, offices. So, she asks: "How many African Internet users have access to the broadband connections that can deliver large amounts of

news-relevant content? If they are viewing content in public places, do they have limitations of time or scrutiny that would discourage them from accessing certain content?"[27]

And then there is the matter of mobile phones, which many believe provide the best way to get digital content to people in remote parts of developing countries. In an extensive country report on Kenya that she wrote to accompany the WAN-IFRA report, Nelson raises questions about that assumption, as well. "People are reluctant to spend SMS fees on news they are accustomed to get for free from the radio or from sharing a newspaper," she writes, citing a program started–and then canceled–by the Star newspaper in Nairobi to send out teasers about news stories. The lack of interest may have been due to income levels (even very inexpensive SMS rates are onerous for impoverished families), or other factors, Nelson writes, but it must be taken into account.[28]

Understanding these issues is critical, especially when working with this new world of digital media, she says. But she believes that sort of analysis is too rarely done. "Usually people start with the solution and assume the problem will fit it."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Strong, innovative, and important work has emerged from the new wave of digitally focused media-development work. IREX and Internews both specialize in long-term projects, giving them deep local connections and consistency, and making it easier to transition to new platforms and techniques while maintaining a focus on content skills. Klatell cited, for example, Internews for its digital radio work. IREX's Thielen points to its USAID-funded program in Georgia that, as part of a focus on sustainability, brought in an expert on how to use digital tools not just for content purposes but also to increase revenue. "We've really seen an improvement in the revenue stream and improved quality of content," she said.

In Klatell's view, the Knight Foundation is handling this evolution "somewhat better, compared to others," by identifying several clear, specific areas of focus, and concentrating on them. And Nelson likes the work of BBC Media Action (formerly BBC World Service Trust), especially because it makes good use of strong local knowledge growing from the World Service's long history in the countries being served. "They have a different approach; they really know how to go hyper-local," she says. "They seem to start with a deep understanding of the local population."

For the most part, the objections raised aren't so much about new things that are being done. Instead, those who question the way the evolution toward digital media has been playing out tend to fault it the most for not being thought through enough–not tailoring the emphasis on digital approaches in media development properly to local conditions, and thus risking major missteps.

Digital technology is "not the solution in many of those countries to the problems they now face," Klatell argues. "Many trainers and organizations are naïve in proposing North American and European solutions to Second and Third World problems. Almost inevitably, you end up reaching a very small number of people. Or, because it sounds so cool, a lot of people sign up, but then they have no real way to use it."

It's also true that things are inevitably harder than they may seem at first. For example, much was made about Kenya creating an Open Data Initiative in 2011, and the potential it would provide for journalistic endeavors such as data boot camps. But, as Susman-Peña wrote in her CIMA report on data journalism, that initiative "has not opened up access to Kenyan data in a way that many had hoped. In fact, Fred Matiang'i, Kenya's information and communications cabinet secretary, declared that he felt the government itself had thwarted the full potential of the ODI."[29]

Maureen Taylor has been involved in analyzing and evaluating media-development programs since her own graduate student days. She has her own theory about the evolution of media development, based on her observations as a social scientist of numerous projects around the world. Media development organizations, Taylor says, were feeling frustrated. They had been doing all this work over many years with traditional media outlets, and they didn't really feel they were achieving the impact they wanted. When the technology revolution hit the industry, they saw an opportunity "for donors and programs to try something new," to bypass traditional media and focus strongly on social media, Internet distribution, and other digital approaches.

Did it work? "I don't think it has," Taylor says, "for a number of reasons, including that there are relatively few people online [in these countries], and even as their numbers increase, there are so many sources of information available–and they're using international sources. So it hasn't improved locally relevant news, which is what we want to see."

In short: "We had a lot of hope [for the digital approach], but I don't really see it" making the hoped-for difference.

Finally, an observation that has been made before, and that has been renewed in the context of the new digital-focused programs, is that the media-development community needs more coordinated efforts.

"Instead of bumping into each other all the time, the foundations should do a better job of sitting down among themselves, and talking about how best to use the whole pot of money," Aumente argues. "I'd like to see a coalition of foundations willing to put their money into a pot and trust each other to say, What do we really need? And if they do that, I think they would do more in the way of the fundamentals, and not just the flavor of the month."

In discussing what he thinks should be happening, Aumente uses an example not far away from his Rutgers campus. The situation is in such flux for the media world right now, he says, the media-development community should approach things "sort of like after Hurricane Sandy. Before we rebuild the same boardwalk and the same housing, it's a good time to stand back and say, how should we do this?"

In that spirit, then, the media development community should:

- Analyze the broader enabling environment and conditions surrounding each intervention, including not only the legal and business climate, but also the links to and possible synergies

with other development projects or programs. Also important is the level and nature of local demand for the work that is being proposed. For example, while journalists are often quite eager to be trained, particularly in the new tools of the digital age, it is important to know whether they will be able to use the training in their workplace, whether the management of their news organizations supports the training, or, more ominously, if such training could put the journalists at risk of being targeted by a hostile regime.

- Focus a similar diagnosis on the more specific "media ecosystem" and technological conditions of the country. Efforts need to be designed and tailored for a particular environment, including its ability to support specific digital techniques and approaches. Technical conditions vary widely–and often are far different than in the West. A "one size fits all" approach is rarely successful.

- Maintain a strong, calculated emphasis both on core journalism and on support for media business sustainability, even when the focus is on training for digital platforms. To make it easier to analyze what mix of solutions works best, media development organizations should disclose the breakdown of projects by areas of emphasis through more transparent, periodic reporting.

- Invest more in research, especially at the front end of projects. Universities could make an invaluable contribution to improving our knowledge of what programs work best under what conditions.

- Rigorously evaluate the new types of projects. Many people call for stronger evaluations overall, but they are especially important with the evolving digital-oriented work, because lessons learned at the beginning will have the greatest impact on future projects.

Epilogue: Thoughts from a Journalism Trainer

For the past seven and one-half years, I have spent large portions of each year doing media-development work–most of it training of journalists or journalism students–in four countries of sub-Saharan Africa, and in Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Inevitably, my own experiences and observations about what works and what doesn't, and what is really important in this work, have passed through my mind while researching and writing this report. None of them is unique, but it may be useful to list what I consider my three strongest lessons from nearly a dozen different training projects.

1. The projects that work best involve follow-up over a period of time. One-shot workshops, "parachute training," can make the trainees happy, but that's not good enough if we truly want to make a difference. Those efforts, which are still all too common, will almost never have meaningful impact. I know this from frustrating experience.

2. In his e-mail comments to me from Kampala, Peter Mwesige listed what he believes are the five most important training needs in Africa. Only the fifth item, data journalism, is even somewhat connected to the trend toward digital and social media development work. The top three items on his list: (a) Journalists need more help in understanding how big institutions (banks, government agencies, corporations) work– or don't work. (b) Related to that, journalists need a better understanding of public policy, and to do more coverage of policy questions and options. (c) Journalists need strengthened analytical skills.

Like many trainers, I have frequently used Bill Kovach and Tom Rosensteil's foundational book, The Elements of Journalism, focusing on its key message: "The essence of journalism is a discipline of verification." Instilling this lesson is an uphill climb in sub-Saharan Africa and also in countries of the former Soviet Union, where journalists have not been taught to ask tough questions of authority. (Indeed, they've been taught exactly the reverse, and are frequently reminded of it by those in authority whenever they have the temerity to try to ask such questions.)

When I have been lucky enough to do repeated training over the years at the same media house, I have been able to concentrate on these more complex areas, and see them develop. I have also seen that even some of the most experienced journalists still need help in the areas of analytical thinking and critical analysis, and the skills of fair but challenging interviewing. For all the powers of Twitter and Facebook, and the utility of hackathons and boot camps, these skills are not likely to come from those tools.

Whatever else happens in the broad universe of media development, if an important goal of that work is to improve the conditions for democracy, it is critical to maintain a sharp, consistent, clearly stated focus on instilling and enhancing these skills of verification.

3. If you cultivate the journalism skills without attending to the business, you waste your time and effort. One of our most effective training programs, delivered at the same Ugandan media house numerous times to new audiences, and in more and more advanced forms to former audiences, is in newsroom management. On my most recent trip, I worked with a leadership team on planning how to manage the complicated transition toward cross-platform convergence. And in Ukraine, I consulted with a group of young, idealistic and talented journalists who were producing investigative story after investigative story–but were on the brink of closing down because nobody in the group knew how to hire an office manager, much less engage in fund-raising or put together a business plan.

"When we were younger, there always was this high Chinese wall between journalists and the money people, advertising–and now I'm not sure that was altogether a good thing," Lisa Schnellinger told me, and she's right: It's important to help journalists understand that this is a business, even if it's a nonprofit business, and give them the skills to build the structures that will keep their enterprises alive.

The media-development community must not ignore the digital explosion and its ramifications, as too many U.S. media outlets did. But its funders, and its practitioners, must also make sure of two things: First, keep the focus on content, not on platform, and do not allow the evolution to important new forms of training to result in a net loss in development work that will help journalists learn the skills of verification. And second, expand programs to help independent media houses gain the management and business skills that will make them more likely to survive.

–Bill Ristow

Endnotes

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16   See http://www.internetworldstats.com/facebook.htm, which cites Facebook subscriber statistics from Socialbakers and applies them to country population statistics

17   Based on http://www.bluemagnet.co.za/blog/the-current-state-of-social-media-in-south-africa- for the Facebook users in South Africa in early 2013 applied to the estimated population at about the same time

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23   Tara Susman-Peña, interview with author, May 2014

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