

Journalism still finding recruits if not profits

September 21 2009, By ANDREW VANACORE , AP Business Writer

(AP) -- At 21, Alana Taylor has already seen her career in journalism transformed and perhaps cut short by the technology reshaping the news business.

She arrived at New York University four years ago thinking about a career in magazines. That morphed quickly to blogging, the faster way to get her writing noticed, she thought. But realizing that \$15 per post wasn't going to pay rent and grocery bills, she took a job with a tech [startup](#) this summer in a market research gig.

For now, Taylor considers journalism a hobby. "I try to keep freelancing on my mind," she said, but the few opportunities that come along tend to pay little if anything.

For a new crop of journalists, with many more wannabes starting journalism school this fall, tumult in the news industry means new opportunities for connecting with readers online, but also fresh anxiety about finding a way to get paid for it.

Consider the latest job market statistics.

According to a survey released this summer by Lee Becker at the University of Georgia, only six in 10 graduates from journalism and mass communication schools during the 2007-08 academic year had full-time employment within six to eight months of leaving school, the lowest since the annual survey began 23 years ago. At the same time, those programs granted more degrees than ever, about 55,000.

As Taylor's case shows, even for those with an enthusiastic embrace of new technology and forms of journalism, there is no guarantee of a living.

Taylor found her niche as a journalism major at NYU writing about technology and social media. She was eventually approached by the blog Mashable, which paid her to interview executives at startups and cover tech conferences in New York. And she found writing for the Web held an appeal that was lost on ink and paper.

"I really like the idea of building my own personal brand," she said. "In regular media you hide behind your byline and no one knows who you are or what you look like. I like that online every time I write something readers can go see my photos or connect with me on Twitter or LinkedIn."

The pay was less appealing.

Starting salaries for reporters have never been impressive - the median pay among recent college graduates at daily newspapers was about \$29,000 in 2008, or about \$2,400 a month. But income in the blogosphere is even less reliable.

Taylor said sticking with journalism over the summer would have meant leaning on her parents for support. So during the break before her last semester she took a part-time marketing job that pays about \$3,000 a month.

All this poses a dilemma for journalism and mass communication schools, which insist jobs are still available, but concede students will need more of an entrepreneurial spirit and a new set of skills.

"The days when you climbed onto the best newspaper you could and

looked forward to doing the same thing for 40 or 50 years are over," said Dean Mills, head of the Missouri School of Journalism. "People who want security or lack ambition probably should not be in journalism schools these days."

Missouri's Reynolds Journalism Institute, a think tank for developing new ways to use technology in reporting, now has a second mission of developing news business models.

Journalism students at Missouri are encouraged to work with their peers in the business and computer science departments - shattering the traditional bright-line separation between the editorial and business sides of the trade.

Last semester, for instance, the institute held a competition that challenged students to design their own iPhone applications, giving the top prize to three students with an app for presenting local real estate listings as points on a map, a function meant to replace classified ads.

"The construct at this school, really until very recently, was that your relationship to the business side should be to keep them at bay - that it was sort of inherently corrupting for a journalist to think about it," said Nick Lemann, dean of the Columbia Journalism School. "Now we have to think about it."

Classified and display advertising is cheap or free online. Same with news.

The business model that supported big city dailies with hundreds on staff a generation ago is slipping away - perhaps for good.

"We're all going to have to think about ways to replace it," Lemann said.

In the meantime, journalism schools have been retooling to prepare students for reporting in the digital era under the assumption that any new business model will have to reckon with the Web.

Ahmed Shihab-Eldin, 25, recalls hauling around his laptop to career fairs to show prospective employers what he could offer. On top of skills with Flash animation, video and HTML Web programming, he speaks Arabic and "enough German and French to get by."

Since graduating from Columbia in 2007, Shihab-Eldin has had no trouble finding Web-related jobs. He's held positions at PBS, The New York Times and Al-Jazeera's English-language TV network.

Trouble is, no one has paid him for what he has been really trained to do - tell stories online. With news organizations still finding their footing on the Internet, Shihab-Eldin has mostly found himself repackaging traditional print or broadcast material. He recalls graveyard shifts writing headlines or editing basic news items to keep Web sites updated.

"It can often be a really, really stifling experience," he said. "You want to report, tell stories, meet people." He has found more gratifying assignments blogging for the Huffington Post, but the site doesn't pay him for his work.

That may sound like a familiar experience to reporters who remember late nights in the newsroom hunched over a police scanner. But Shihab-Eldin says he is not discouraged.

Nor does he feel much nostalgia for the halcyon days of newspaper journalism.

"To be honest, I don't think I would have stuck with journalism if these new opportunities and challenges hadn't been there," he said. "The thing

that gets me going is, how can we tell the story in the most dynamic way."

Until someone steps up to pay him for it, Shihab-Eldin said he is willing to stick it out.

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