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Student journalists go digital-first with positive attitudes

November 28, 2012 / by [Katrina M Mendolera](#)



Andy Rossback and fellow student journalists at the University of Oregon's Daily Emerald took 11 months to re-imagine the student paper as a media organization rather than a print entity.

During the process that saw the paper go from a daily to a twice-weekly, staff asked everyone from advertisers to professional journalists to be a part of the process. "We asked everyone to step back and be honest with themselves. Were we serving our mission? Our staff was ready for the change because they had a voice in it and they were educated about the business realities," said Andy Rossback, the paper's editor in chief, in an email interview.

Rossback isn't the only student journalist with his sights set on the future. Last fall, the University of Georgia's Red & Black student paper also took the plunge and went from a daily to a weekly, incorporating a digital-first workflow. Most recently, Arizona State University's The State Press [announced](#) it would cease printing as a daily next year to go weekly.

Meanwhile, Texas Christian University's The Daily Skiff also decided to focus on its digital product, although the paper continues to run Tuesday through Friday. The paper has been reduced from 12 to eight pages, but it's the production that is most different, noted Lexy Cruz, executive editor of TCU Student Media. Now instead of waiting to put a story in the next day's paper, it's posted instantly to the website.

Among student types, there seems to be less resistance when moving to a digital-first model. Whereas when a mainstream news outlet does the same, there is usually a lot of lamenting over the death of print. Often, this resistance to change has a lot to do with the layoffs that inevitably follow such an announcement. But there is also a sadness to see a beloved paper reduced to pixels and search terms. Fearing the worst when Advance Publications cut frequency at several of its papers, including the Times-Picayune and Syracuse Post-Standard, staff at the Cleveland Plain Dealer recently banded together and [launched](#) a campaign to "Save the Plain Dealer." Student journalists, on the other hand, appear to be approaching the transformation from print to digital somewhat differently.

In [August](#) Chase Cook of The Oklahoma Daily at the University of Oklahoma expressed disappointment that his paper hadn't gone digital-first like initially planned that summer. The paper was originally supposed to go digital in July, and then resume its print schedule in the fall, but the publishing board reversed the decision after receiving extra funds. However, Chase felt it would have been a great opportunity for the paper to take advantage of technology and social media, he noted at the time. Over in Arizona, State Press executive editor Julie Vitkovskaya actually used the word "excited" over the prospect of going digital-first, [reported](#) The Poynter Institute.

Although appearances may be deceiving, Cruz believes her generation may be more ready for these changes because they're so plugged in to the Web and social media. "If we have the information, I feel like we'd be doing a disservice to our community by holding onto it for just a day to put it on the front page," she said.

But that's not to say that student journalists don't have a hard time adjusting to change as well. The idea of what a paper should be is ingrained in many journalists, noted Rossback. "Even 19-year-old journalists. Two years ago that was true for me, but I became more interested in the business of media. Once you really look at the numbers, you see that something big has to change," he said.

Steve Buttry, a proponent of digital-first newsrooms and director of community engagement and social media for the Journal Register Company's Digital First Media, has worked with many student newspaper staffs and college administrations as a consultant. He performs an exercise with students, where he asks students to tell him the different ways they consume media. Predictably, the numbers in the computer and mobile columns far outweigh print and even broadcast.

"Certainly, in college students throw themselves into what they do with an enthusiasm that is reflective of their age, perhaps reflective of the passion education requires, so the students that work on a campus newspaper are going to have some mixed feelings about a change like that. Resistance to change is not a factor of age it's a factor of being human; we all get attached to things. I think there will be some mixed feelings; there will be some nostalgia even when students change," he said. But "they know how their generation consumes media."

—Katrina M. Mendolera