NICAR18 Early Career Straight-Talk Panel Mentors

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General Q&A

Rachel Alexander (@rachelwalexande) | Data Reporter, The Spokesman-Review

Rachel is a health and social services reporter at the Spokesman-Review in Spokane, Washington and is also the go-to data geek in the newsroom. She's used public records and data analysis to report on everything from health care providers dying of opioid overdoses to roadkill salvaging. She's the founder of Washington News Nerds, a group of data-minded women in Washington newsrooms committed to sharing their skills with female journalists across the West. In her spare time, she plays roller derby.

"Learning data analysis or tech skills for specific stories has helped me retain information better and made me more motivated because I have a clear goal I'm working toward. Knowing how to talk to people with different tech skills from you is just as important as learning skills yourself (ie, I can write a bit of code, but more importantly, I know how to talk to a news app developer about what I want and sketch out the logic of a program without actually coding it)."

Darla Cameron (@darlacameron) | Graphics Editor, The Washington Post

I'm a graphics editor at The Washington Post, where I analyze data to tell visual stories at the intersection of politics and economics.

"Your career won't take a linear path, and you won't come out of college as a fully formed journalist. Expect to grow and change, and look for a work environment where that is encouraged."

Ronald Campbell (@campbellronaldw) | Data Editor, NBC-Owned Television Stations

I've been a reporter for four decades, mostly in print, lately in broadcast, almost entirely doing investigative and data work.

"Stand out from the crowd. I started doing data when data was weird. (They put me in a closet — literally, in a closet with the heating pipes.) It's the only reason I still have a job. Look for stories that no one else is doing. Take risks. But when you get laid off — and you will — bosses elsewhere will know your name."

Alejandra Cancino (@WriterAlejandra) | Investigative Reporter, Better Government Association

Alejandra Cancino is an investigative reporter at Better Government Association, a Chicago-based nonpartisan nonprofit. She worked at the Chicago Tribune from 2009 to 2015 as a business reporter covering manufacturing, economic development and labor. Her 2015 labor coverage earned a local award for best business and consumer reporting. That same year, Cancino was awarded a journalism fellowship by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Chicago. Prior to the Tribune, Cancino was a multimedia reporter and a web producer for La Palma, a Spanish-language weekly, and covered weekend crime shifts for the Palm Beach Post.

Greg Linch (@greglinch) | Back-end Developer, Industry Dive

Greg is a back-end developer at Industry Dive, a business media company in D.C. that offers news and analysis for executives in 13 different industries. He previously worked at McClatchy and The Washington Post. Greg teaches web development at Georgetown University as an adjunct and is a member of the ONA board of directors.

“Join News Nerdery and/or Lonely Coders Club slack groups and the NICAR-L listserv. Learn the tools that will best equip you to achieve your goals — not just what people say are "the" tools to use now. For example, when someone asks what programming language they should learn, it's best to consider what they want to accomplish with it. If you're interested in creating website and interactive graphics, then learn Javascript. If you want to focus on data acquisition and analysis, then Python or R is probably best. If you want to build news apps and tools, then Python or Ruby. Also, I always suggest learning a language that the most number of your friends/colleagues/etc know — that way you can ask questions when you get stuck.”

Megan Luther (@MeganLuther) | Investigative Producer, Raycom Media

Megan Luther is an investigative producer for Raycom Media's national investigative team. Previously, she served as training director for Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE). Megan has worked in radio, TV and most recently, newspapers. Before she joined IRE, Megan was a government reporter for the Argus Leader in South Dakota and a computer-assisted reporting specialist for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Previously, she worked at IRE and NICAR in the Database Library while completing her master's degree at the University of Missouri.

“Hone your data skills by solving your current problems. Most of us learn on the job. Google and NICAR-L listserv are full of friends who've faced the same data issue. ”

Matthew Weber (@reutersgraphics) | Global Head of Graphics, Reuters

Matthew is the Global Head of Graphics for Reuters in New York. He's previously worked in the graphics department and as an Art Director at the Wall Street Journal.

“I find that the way you think is more important than what you know. Gaps in knowledge can be filled, but it’s difficult to teach someone to be a critical thinker.

People who demonstrate bold or interesting ideas are more valuable than those who simply execute tasks well.

That said, the interactive graphics space overlaps with a lot of different disciplines and skill sets. Writing. Reporting. Editing. Data literacy. Design. Development. Illustration. Animation. Cartography. Photography. Having a strong mastery in one area is useful, but some fluency across all of them is highly desirable.

In other words, don't forget about design! I meet a lot of people starting out in this business who have strong coding chops and good story ideas based on complex data, but have paid little attention to presentation, the front-line of interaction with your reader.”

Grad school and fellowships

Armand Emamdjomeh (@emamd) | Graphics Reporter, The Washington Post

Armand Emamdjomeh makes data visualizations, maps and graphics at The Washington Post. Prior to the Post, he was Deputy Director of Data Visualization at the Los Angeles Times and an alum of the L.A. Times Data Desk.

“The ability to learn! To not be afraid of and diagnose a problem.

As far as languages go, JavaScript is becoming more and more ubiquitous, and Python is also incredibly flexible. More important though is the ability to identify the important parts of a story and how to tell it visually.”

Disha Raychaudhuri (@Disha_RC) | Data and Investigations Reporter, NJ Advance Media

Disha is a reporter on the data and investigations team at The Star-Ledger in New Jersey, and is a recent transplant from LA. Before moving to the U.S., she worked as a journalist in India and Bangladesh. She is obviously interested in all kinds of nerdy data things, especially numbers on criminal justice issues and the deathcare industry, but is also always on the lookout for good horror movie and dessert recommendations (yes, they go together).

“If you're completely new to something, get your feet wet in a couple of different aspects and get a sense of what you like. Then try to develop that. For example, if you are new to data journalism, see if you like analysis or graphics. If you really like analysis, take a stats lesson or maybe learn Python/R/SQL, and try to be good at it. It pays to be very good at one thing instead of being average at tons of things.”

Steven Rich (@dataeditor) | Database Editor for Investigations, The Washington Post

Helga L. Salinas (@Helga_Salinas) | Social Media Producer, The Seattle Times

Helga Salinas currently works at The Seattle Times as the paper's only social media producer. Most recently, she worked at the Los Angeles Times also doing social media. She also previously worked with Univision’s digital team La Huella Digital as a reporter/developer, and as an intern on the NPR Visuals Team. She graduated from Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, but her passion for journalism stemmed from her experience as a part of La Gente, UCLA’s Latino student news magazine.

“Ask questions to people who have gone through it before, whatever it is -- academic program, learning a new skill, etc.”

Mahima Singh (@amiham_singh) | Data Intern, The Palm Beach Post

Mahima Singh is a data journalist at the Palm Beach Post in South Florida. Before that, she was with a news analysis and media criticism website in India. She has an MS in Computational Journalism from Syracuse University where she learned to programme in Python and hasn't stopped since.

“I have always found Medium to be a great source for learning, especially publications like Free Code Camp, Towards Data Science and Hacker Noon. But there are stand-alone gems like articles on using AI to generate lyrics and data journalism techniques for finding stories faster. Medium is truly Pandora’s Box of productivity.

I highly recommend Kaggle, a platform where data scientists compete in groups to come up with the best data analysis models. To be honest, you don’t really need to have an account, you can still access tutorials and discussions e.g. Machine Learning Tutorials For Beginners. They also have a neat job board.

For all you Women Who Code, WWC has a great “Resources” page that can be accessed by anyone (I think. Don’t know if you burst into flames or break the internet if you are not a woman)

There’s some great job hunting advice at The Muse.”

International work

Christine Chan (@christyxcore) | Graphics Editor, Americas, Thomson Reuters

Kai Teoh (@jkteoh) | News Application Developer, The Spokesman-Review

Kai Teoh is a web developer at the Spokesman-Review in Washington. He has previously worked in various different roles in the newsroom, before deciding that he could contribute to journalism the most by embracing his inner geek and being a developer.

“Re: Immigration: Be as prepared as you can be. Create your own network of peers that have gone through the same that you can lean on, realize it's OK to feel overwhelmed, and take charge in pursuing management and other relevant parties for clear answers and holding them to deadlines.”

Kavya Sukumar (@kavyaSukumar) | Senior Full-Stack Engineer, Vox Media

Mago Torres (@magiccia) | JSK Fellow, Stanford University

Lam Thuy Vo (@lamthuyvo) | Senior Reporter, BuzzFeed

Lam Thuy Vo is an interdisciplinary journalist currently working as a senior reporter at BuzzFeed where she tells stories about the intersection of technology and society and off the news. Previously, she's had a number of different roles at The Wall Street Journal, Al Jazeera America and NPR's Planet Money both in the U.S. and abroad. She's also been a journalism instructor for close to a decade, teaching a variety of workshops as well as semester-long courses for companies, organizations and universities around the world.

Internships

Alex Duner (@asduner) | Front-end Developer, Axios

I'm a front-end developer at Axios where I build news products and come up with innovative ways to tell stories. I've previously interned at Axios, BuzzFeed, The New York Times and the Texas Tribune. I recently graduated from Northwestern University where I was a Student Fellow at the Knight Lab and the Director of Product at North by Northwestern.

Jayme Fraser (@jaymekfraser) | Investigative Reporter, Malheur Enterprise/ProPublica

Jayme Fraser is a reporter for the Malheur Enterprise, a weekly in Vale, Ore. In 2018, she is investigating the insanity defense as part of ProPublica's Local Reporting Network. Before that, Fraser covered state government and created data visualizations for the Missoulian in Montana,

and was a government and religion reporter at the Houston Chronicle. She has written about how the Indian Health Service isn't meeting the needs of Native American patients, and about questionable science presented in a local "shaken baby" case. Last fall, Fraser helped lead a first-time collaboration between the Missoulian and the University of Montana School of Journalism to investigate why the state has so many drug-exposed births and how to close the gaps in services for mothers and mothers-to-be who use drugs. Outside the newsroom, she loves to climb mountains, catch fish and cuddle with her green cheek conures. When she roots, she roots for the Portland Timbers and Thorns.

"IFTTT: Automate a variety of tasks, including the collection of tweets, Reddit posts, Wikipedia changes, etc. and dazzle your editors with stories or organizational hacks that secretly cost you no time.

Use a side project as an excuse to learn new skills, preferably something evergreen that you can stumble through at your own pace.

For those in the northwest, seek out the Washington News Nerds. It's a new group of journalists who network, mentor and swap skills training. The first (un)conference this fall in Tacoma for lady journos was a major success and a second will be hosted in Spokane sometime this spring."

Brittany Mayes (@BritRenee_) | Associate News Apps Developer, NPR

Brittany Mayes is a news apps developer at NPR. She is a 2016 graduate of the University of North Carolina, after which she attended the New York Times Student Journalism Institute and interned at NPR. After freelancing for a short time, she rejoined the NPR Visuals team for election coverage and now continues to work mostly on graphics and news applications.
"Don't stop creating and don't be afraid to fail. I, as an intern hiring manager, would rather see a portfolio with one or two polished pieces, but mostly full of weird and unfinished projects than an empty one.

Find someone in the workforce whose job you'd like to have and ask them to grab coffee or chat with you.

Be in touch with the community. Volunteer. Find a mentor. Attend conferences (like NICAR!). Attend local meet ups. There are many people who are willing to help. Then, once you've gotten to a good place, reach back and help the next person."

Moiz Syed (@moizsyed) | Data Journalist and Designer, The Intercept

Moiz Syed is a data journalist and designer with The Intercept. He was previously at the Wikimedia Foundation where he led design efforts on projects supporting transparency and free knowledge. See more of his work at http://moiz.ca.

“Work on side projects to develop new skills.”

Job hunting

Annie Daniel (@anieldaniel) | Data Visuals Developer, The Texas Tribune

Anthony DeBarros (@anthonydb) | Senior Vice President of Content and Product, FierceMarkets (Questex)

Anthony DeBarros has combined an avid interest in data analysis, coding, and storytelling for much of his career. He spent more than 25 years with the Gannett company, including the Poughkeepsie Journal, USA TODAY, and Gannett Digital. He later joined the staff of Investigative Reporters and Editors to head up product development for the DocumentCloud service. Currently, he is senior vice president for content and product for a publishing and events firm and lives and works in the Washington, DC, area.

“If you're thinking about getting into product management or product development, whether in a news context or elsewhere, I would recommend:

- Learn as much as you can about how websites work: how they're built, how they're served, how ads get integrated, how they make money, how to track performance via analytics, etc.
- Keep track of technical trends. It all changes so fast, but you'll need to make decisions based on current best practices. Example: Google Chrome recently starting to block annoying ads.
- Attend at least one conference or meetup that has absolutely nothing to do with your area of expertise. See how people who work in an entirely different arena do their jobs, and learn what they care about. You may be inspired.
- Be a person who transcends worlds. Engineers, readers, journalists, marketers, salespeople, etc. all come at the business from a different angle. People who can help these sometimes disparate groups understand each other's needs are highly valuable in an organization. Know something about all areas of the business. Don't be a newsroom-only person.
- Speaking of which, learn the art of diplomacy.”

Jeremy C. F. Lin (@Jeremy_CF_Lin) | Interactive Designer, Politico

Originally from Taipei, Taiwan, Jeremy C.F. Lin is a graphics reporter at POLITICO. He is a recent graduate from UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism and was a Google Journalism Fellow at the Texas Tribune. He has previous worked for Bloomberg and interned with New York Times Graphics and Washington Post Graphics.

“1. Always have at least three pitches in your pocket.
2. Google around the company's previous hires and check what skillsets you are lacking.

3. Understand that journalism is still a business and sometimes there are other factors at play, when it comes to hiring, not getting hired doesn't always mean you aren't good enough.
4. Use Twitter and show your work. Your work can't speak for itself if it doesn't have a chance to be shown.
5. If you are a foreigner, Google around and see if there were other non-American journalists hired for the job you would like."

Casey Miller (@caseymmiller) | Data Visualization Specialist (Mapbox)

Casey is a data visualization specialist at Mapbox. Before Mapbox, Casey was an engineer at Vox Media where she worked with various editorial teams to tell one-of-a-kind stories across a variety of platforms. She has also worked with teams at the Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, and Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Casey graduated from UNC Chapel Hill with a bachelor's degree in Journalism and Mass Communication.

"It really depends on what you are interested in! If you are interested in making interactive visualizations, you probably want to explore Javascript more in-depth, particularly visualization libraries such as d3. If you're more interested in data analysis, exploring Python or R will likely prove helpful. That said, I've often found that one of the best approaches is to pick a project you want to do and just figure out how to accomplish what you need to. There are usually a variety of approaches that will work for certain tasks, e.g. what I accomplish with Python my colleague usually uses Node for, so it's really just about finding a way that works for you."

Justin Myers (@myersjustinc) | Data Journalist, The Associated Press

Justin is the news automation editor at The Associated Press, where he helps design and build new tools for reporters and editors—and sometimes works on stories as a member of the AP's data journalism team. He previously has worked for The Chronicle of Higher Education, The Chronicle of Philanthropy and the PBS NewsHour. He's based in Chicago.

"1: Perhaps the most important skill is the ability to explain technical concepts in more traditionally editorial terms. Put differently, you should be able to make a grumpy old editor care when you spot something fishy about a source's methodology.

2: Learn how to learn. You won't know everything on deadline, but you should know *what* you don't know and how you might get up to speed on it.

3: Learn a programming language — any programming language — and build a couple of small projects with it, even if you don't publish them anywhere. That will make it much easier for you to learn another one later if a job needs you to."

Networking

Jeremy Bowers (@jeremybowers) | Senior Editor for News Applications, The New York Times

Jeremy Bowers is the Senior Editor for news applications on the Interactive News desk of The New York Times where he manages a small team combining coding skills with journalistic sensibilities.

“Early career: Pick a general purpose programming language and start solving problems with it. Python is great; so are Ruby, R and JavaScript (Node).

Anyone: Talk to reporters and editors about how they use their computer to report on their beat. You'll find rough edges that you could sand down to smooth with a little bit of software.

Mid-career: Build for use; optimize for re-use (stolen shamelessly from my mentor, Brian Boyer). What this means: Don't try to make an optimized or abstracted tool the first time you encounter a problem — you can just solve it. The SECOND time you encounter the problem, start thinking about how to abstract or optimize.”

AmyJo Brown (@amyjo_brown) | Editor, War Streets Media

AmyJo Brown’s excitement for city and county budgets, committee meetings and dusty shelves of public records is matched only by her happiness in the day’s first cup of coffee. An investigative reporter and editor who specializes in covering local governments, AmyJo’s 15-year career in journalism has included work in communities ranging from the cowboy country of eastern Oregon to those deep in the Southern Delta of Arkansas. But hers is not a traditional story. Passionate about the future of the industry and keeping the newsroom lights on, AmyJo has also channeled her reporting skills into design and entrepreneurial work — creating content strategies and revenue plans for data and digital properties and bridging the worlds between the newsroom and its business side.

“Become an expert in something you are passionate about and then design your career so that you can keep doing it. You'll have side trips. That's OK and sometimes necessary. But if you stay committed to your values and your thing — whatever it is — you'll get where you want to go.

Related: Don't chase a name. Chase the job description. What do you get to do? There are benefits to working at a place like the New York Times. But you'll be worth a lot more to the NYT (or any other large publication) if you've spent time in the south or the midwest reporting full-time on a small staff, learning how to compile the police blotter, write obits, analyze your own

data and work a beat that has you interviewing sources from the top of a sewage tower or the cab of a truck.

Save money. Take a chunk out of each paycheck — $10, $20, $100 — and put it into a F-you fund. Build it so that you have a year's min. salary or more set aside. This will give you confidence to say no when someone asks you to do something that goes against your values. It will give you leeway if a wonderful but low-paying opportunity comes your way. And it's also just smart financial planning: Layoffs will happen, and they don't all come with severance.

Do the work. As a freelancer, you have to do a lot of the business stuff that feels like it takes you away from doing what you love. In a newsroom, it's easy to get caught up in the internal dramas. When you feel consumed or overwhelmed by the non-journalism stuff, stop and do some journalism. Remind yourself what makes it all worth it."

Sandhya Kambhampati (@sandhya__k) | Data Reporter, ProPublica Illinois

Sandhya Kambhampati is a data reporter at ProPublica Illinois. Previously, she was a Knight-Mozilla OpenNews Fellow at Correctiv in Berlin and a database reporter at the Chronicle of Higher Education. She also trains journalists regularly in understanding statistics, freedom of information laws and data analysis.

Denise Lu (@DeniseDSLu) | Graphics Editor, The New York Times

I mostly specialize in interactive graphics, and also maps, charts and print graphics, as well as data analysis and parsing. It all depends on the day and project! I just started at The New York Times in January, after working four years at The Washington Post, which included my time there as a journalism resident during my senior year at Northwestern University. I like food, and music, like everyone else, blahblah you get it.

"I learned everything on the job which is crazy but I got lucky and had a really supportive and welcoming team at The Washington Post. Never be afraid to ask questions — especially if you're an intern, that's what you're there for. Also don't be scared of new tools or languages, nobody knows everything and that's what makes this field so great."