CMIC
College Media
Innovation Coalition

COLLEGE
MEDIA
PLAYBOOK

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Introduction

The beginnings

This playbook was formed out of the College Media Innovation Coalition, a group I founded in the fall of 2022 after feeling isolated as a leader in a college media organization. I wanted a place to ask questions and solve problems with students in similar positions around the country. So, I launched the coalition as a place to do that. If you haven't already joined the College Media Innovation Coalition, make sure you fill out this form so you can connect with other college journalists from across the country!

As the coalition grew, I started to recognize key themes among the problems these college newsrooms were facing: finding sustainable sources of funding, continuing progress through high staff turnover and divesting from print. This playbook is a living resource to give college newsroom leaders ideas and structures to address these problems in their own organizations.

Philosophy and methodology

Student newsrooms are valuable sources of news for college communities across the country. We serve audiences, provide vital information and act as many student journalists' first taste of a newsroom environment. Students get hands-on journalism experience in a low-stakes, experimental environment that gives students the room to explore their interests, try new ideas, and innovate. With less bureaucracy and a digitally native staff, we have the opportunity to lead the industry on innovation. However, we also face challenges in a different way from professional newsrooms.

To craft this playbook, I surveyed 22 college newsrooms from across the country and talked to students and professionals about how college media organizations can address the challenges they're facing. My philosophy is that if student newsrooms can solve their problems to operate with the highest efficiency, they will have more time to push innovation in their newsrooms. When students have more time to experiment, they can truly be on the leading edge of innovation within the entire journalism industry.

The foundational principle of this playbook is that every student newsroom is different. Even if they serve the same size student population, have the same structure and are funded the same way. They are all unique. The goal of this isn't to prescribe the perfect solution to every single newsroom. Instead, I hope it proposes solutions and gives students a starting place for leveling up their college newsroom.

Part 1: Funding

Whether it's for a new digital product or paying staff, funding is a key part of sustainable student media infrastructures. The two most basic streams of revenue are advertising and fundraising. In this section, we'll break down each of these and give you ideas to level up your revenue structures.

Advertising

While your organization's print advertising may not be the most sustainable source of revenue, there's lots of other ways to advertise. If you're just getting started, make sure you have a media kit and a rate card. These are both documents that you can give to potential advertisers to share information about who your audience is, how you reach them, and what your advertising rates are.

Media kits
Media kits have all the information your potential advertisers need to make the decision to advertise with you. These are usually well-designed and can be as many pages as you need. Important components of a media kit:

- Introduction to your organization
- Statistics about your audience
  - How many students do you reach?
  - What is their buying power?
  - How and when do you reach your audience?
  - Keep in mind: your publication is a direct line to 18-22 year olds, and a lot of advertisers want to reach that demographic. Use that to your advantage!
- Dates of all print editions
- Pricing and sizing for print and digital ads
- Include any other advertising or sponsorship opportunities for podcasts, newsletters, etc.
- Include guidelines, policies in full detail, etc.
- Contact information for placing ads

See examples of great media kits from across the country:
- [Arizona State University Student Media](#)
- [NC State Student Media](#)
- [The Daily Free Press - Boston University](#)
- [Indiana Daily Student - Indiana University](#)
- [Gonzaga University Student Media](#)
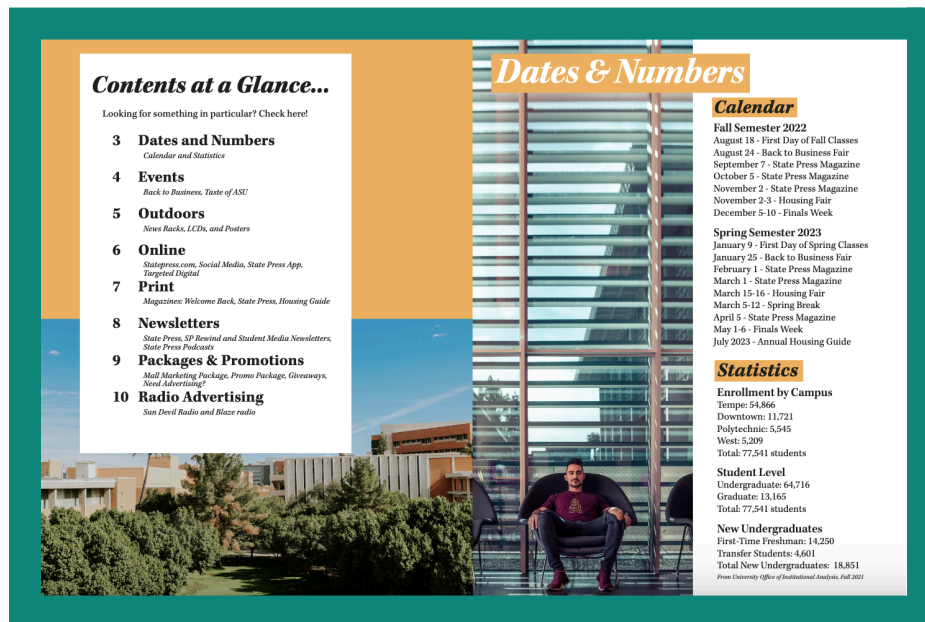
Arizona State University Student Media's Media Kit

Rate cards

Rate cards are a condensed version of a media kit that primarily feature ad rates. They are usually just one page, containing the rates in addition to contact information and basic instructions.

Key components of a rate card:
- Basic information about the organization
- All advertising rates and packages
- Contact information
- Transactional details

See examples of great rate cards from student media across the country:
- [FIU Student Media](#)
- [Duke Chronicle](#)
- [The Miami Student](#)

Building an infrastructure

If you're looking to make advertising your primary source of revenue, it's important to have an established infrastructure, including a dedicated team and processes.

Here are some things to think about as you build this infrastructure:

- Create a clear code of ethics for separating business and editorial
  - See ONA's guide to creating a code of ethics here
  - The New York Times' advertising ethics
- Build your team- there are lots of different ways you can do this, but here is a sample structure
  - Business or Advertising Manager: Sets the strategy and builds the team, main person responsible for advertising success
  - Advertising reps: People who are responsible for selling ads to businesses. You can have them separated by part of the organization they're advertising for (podcast, web, print, newsletter, etc.), or you can separate them by parts of the community (campus, local, national, etc.)
  - If you plan to have an in-house creative services team that is in charge of making ads, you can add that team in here as well.
- Determine the main point of contact for advertisers
- Determine your ad prices & packages

Examples

Texas A&M and University of Texas built a partnership through Texas Student Media to build a robust advertising network. Their structure allows them to create advertising partnerships which they say is especially lucrative for working with student housing corporations and study tool business like Quizlet.

Notre Dame's student newspaper, The Observer, has a special print edition where the family and friends of soon-to-be graduates can purchase quarter, half or full page ads. These ads highlight graduating seniors and generate revenue for the paper.

See an example from Spring 2022 below. Click here to view the full issue.
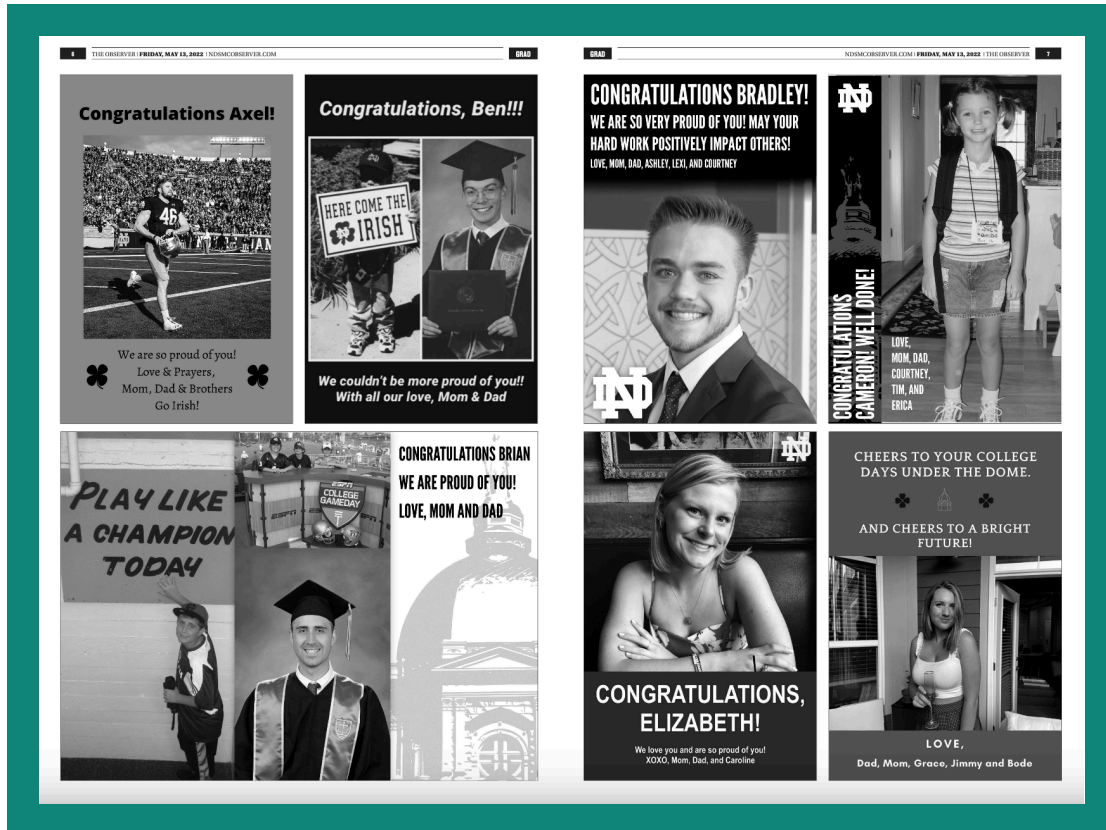
The Observer, University of Notre Dame

Fundraising

For some college newsrooms, advertising revenue alone doesn't cut it anymore. If you're pivoting to a fundraising model, here are some ideas for you.

Connect with the advancement or fundraising office at your university

The people who are in charge of fundraising for your college or university are a great resource to get your feet under you for fundraising. They may be willing to share contacts or reach out to donors for you. It's important to be clear that you are not a competitor of the university for funding—the amount of money that is impactful for your organization is likely much smaller than it is for your university.

If your school has a journalism program, see if they have donors or are willing to share an alumni list with you. If they won't share contact information, see if they are willing to share advice about the best way to build a fundraising campaign, where they have found success before, etc. or if they're willing to send an email out on your behalf.

Build connections with your alumni

No one believes in the mission of your organization more than your alumni. However, they don't want to be hit up only when you need money. Make a consistent effort to engage with your alumni in other ways throughout the year. Give them opportunities to give back to your staff and keep them in the loop with your organization year-round.

Here are some examples of ways you can engage with them:
- Send out a periodic newsletter that keeps them informed on what your staff is doing. Don't think of this the same way as your other newsletters. This should be a more behind-the-scenes look at your organization.
- Invite them to to a Facebook group where you can send updates
- Ask them to review your content periodically and give feedback for improvement
- Have them buy merch
- Invite them to join an advisory board for your organization
- Ask them to be join a mentorship program for your staff
- Organize networking events or workshops for staff

Then, when you're raising money, they know what's going on and they know the impact of their donation on staff experiences.

Plan strategic fundraising campaigns

Build a team of people who will run a targeted fundraising campaign for a couple weeks. There are lots of great times to do this, but here are a couple ideas:

- Anniversary of your publication's founding
- Your university's annual giving day
- Student Press Freedom Day

In 2021, The Daily Orange at Syracuse University started a fundraising competition called College Media Madness. This annual competition coincides with the March Madness college basketball tournaments and helps student newsrooms fundraise to support their operations. It has since been taken over by The State Press at Arizona State University. In 2023, College Media Madness raised over $135,000 for student journalism. If you haven't been involved but want to be, email fundraising.statepress@gmail.com to get involved!

Here are some tips and ideas for your next fundraising campaign:

- Don't set a specific monetary goal, otherwise, once you hit it, the donations will stop rolling in. Instead, tell people how much money you need for certain things. Example: It takes $150 to send one student to a conference
- Reach out to some high-profile alums of your organization and ask them to help spread the word
- Find someone to match gifts
- Create hashtags and encourage people to share once they donate
- Tell student stories of how they benefit from donations
- Have your staff make phone calls, post on social media, send emails
- Always highlight the impact of donations on your organization and staff

A great example of this is The Daily Pennsylvanian at the University of Pennsylvania which has an alumni association that has hosted its own internal fundraising competition called Masthead Madness. During this competition, alumni compete against each other to raise the most money for the Daily Pennsylvanian. They have incentives, old photos, a leaderboard and more!

Highlight impact to draw donations

The key to successful donation drives is highlighting the impact of your work on the community and of donations on your work.

The Baltimore Banner does this seamlessly by dedicating an entire page to the impact of their journalism. They lay out the tangible results from their reporting and throughout their page is a box that encourages people to donate to support impactful journalism.
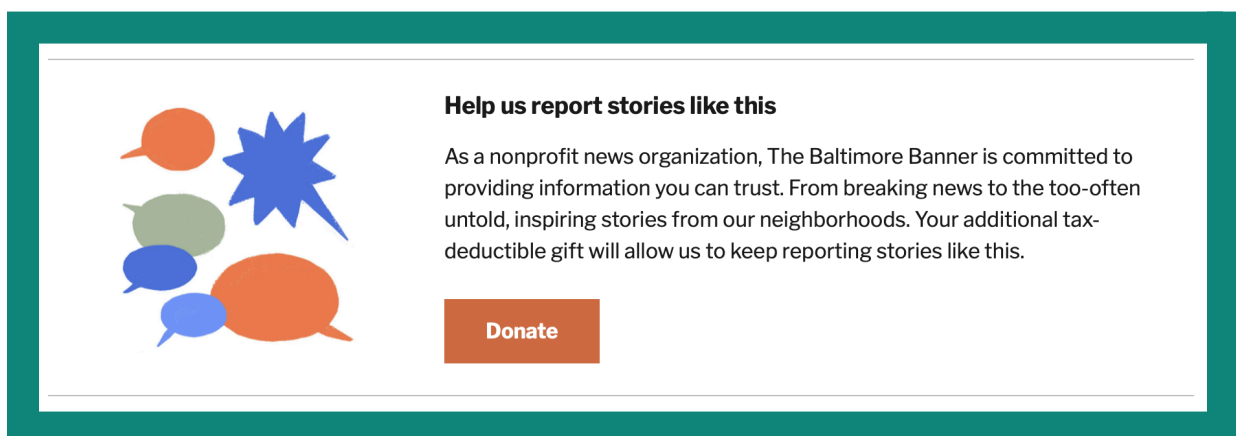
In addition, their donation page includes the link to the impact page so potential donors can understand the impact of the journalism they're supporting. On this page, they also make it clear exactly how donations support their work. At the top of their stories, they

also include links to subscribe and donate. The connection to impact remains the same in the copy across all parts of the website.

> *Our nonprofit news organization is made possible by <u>subscribers</u> and <u>donors</u> who value storytelling that impacts and uplifts communities. Thank you for supporting our journalism.*

Additional fundraising resources

The [News Revenue Hub](#) built a contribution management platform designed specifically for newsrooms. The organization said, "Student newsrooms are welcome to use [RevEngine](#) as long as they have a university-approved bank account to accept donations via Stripe. It's important for each college newsroom to explore its school's policies beforehand."

The [News Giving Roadmap](#) from the Institute for Nonprofit News is a great resource for college newsrooms looking to profit more from fundraising. Newsrooms that are not officially nonprofit newsrooms may still benefit from this philosophy and strategy.

Another way to convert audiences to supporters is to connect the organization engagement to a sustainable revenue stream. [This guide from Hearken](#) provides step-by-step guides, exercises and checklists to help your newsroom align your mission with money.

If you're looking for more inspiration, when COVID-19 hit, the Student Press Law Center put together a [College Media Survival Guide](#) that highlights some additional points about solidifying sustainable revenue streams, especially for organizations still funded by their university.

Other funding strategies

Membership programs

In 2020, The Daily Orange at Syracuse University [launched a membership program](#) where supporters could set up recurring donations to support their newsroom. They

modeled it after programs from other nonprofit newsrooms like The 19th, ProPublica and The Texas Tribune.

If you're looking to set up a membership program for your organization, here are some starting steps, courtesy of the Lenfest Institute's Membership Puzzle Project:

1. Get to know your potential members. Conduct audience research to understand what they value so you can identify and market your unique value proposition.
2. Using that information, center your membership program around your organization's values, mission and capacity.
3. Determine the pricing for your newsroom based on the information you collected in the previous steps.

The project explains that step number one is the most important: defining your value proposition. Membership prices and perks can evolve, but what defines the success of a membership program is the ability to make your organization uniquely relevant to your audience and potential member base. Explore more of the membership guide, which includes an in-depth guide, FAQs and case studies, here.

Sell your organization's photos

The Daily Tar Heel at the University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill has a website where anyone can purchase photos they've taken. This ranges from paper prints to canvases to mugs and mouse pads.

Create a merchandise store

The Michigan Daily at the University of Michigan has a merchandise store where people can buy apparel with the newspaper's branding! This is a great way to raise money and build your brand presence. Alumni love getting merch from their college newspaper days too!
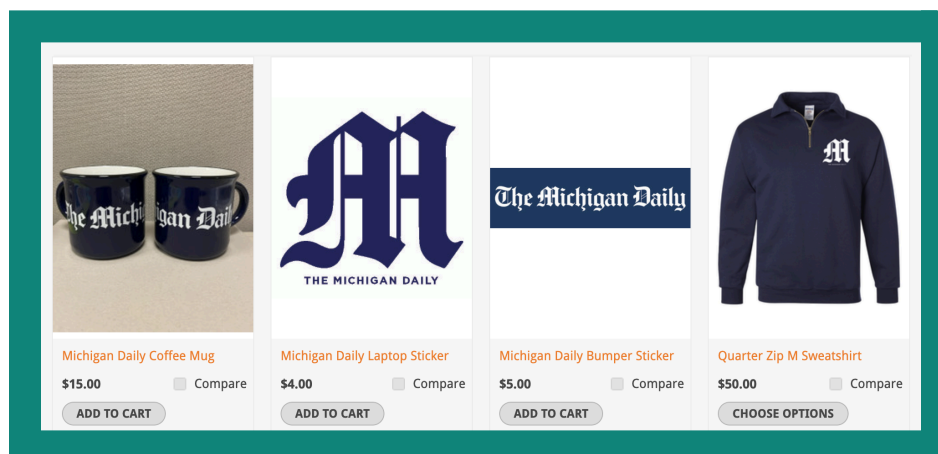
Part 2: Staff Retention

College media organizations face the fastest turnover in the entire journalism industry. Most people are on staff for a couple years, but sometimes you only have a semester or two to make an impact. In this section we'll cover some tactics to retain staff and how to continue making progress toward long-term goals with frequent staff turnover.

Benefits of frequent turnover

Let's look at some of the positives of having consistent turnover and explore how you can use them to your advantage.

Shifting audiences

As your staff changes every four years (or more), so does your audience. This opens up all kinds of possibilities, but especially for republishing content. Many staff members come into organizations with little knowledge of what was produced before they got there. Yet, the needs of audiences can be relatively evergreen. So, instead of rewriting the same stories each year, keep track of your evergreen content to update and repromote so your staff can focus on new stories.

Not sure where to start? I wrote this guide to creating an evergreen content strategy centered around natural disaster coverage, but it can be applied to any topic! All you need is a collaborative place to track your content (like AirTable or Google Sheets) and a team willing to dive through your archives! This is a great summer project that can accelerate audience growth and retention during the school year.

Less resistance to change

No more "that's how it's always been done." Each new class in your organization has no idea how things were done the year before. With a new staff composition each year, it's easy to reorient strategies toward your goals. Your staff is likely excited to try new ideas and, being a student newsroom, you have much more space to try, fail, and try again! So set a clear strategy, and take advantage of the voices and ideas coming from your new staff!

Retention Strategies

But, if you'd rather not lose staff at all, here are some retention strategies.

Pay your staff

One of the things that differed the most in my survey of college media outlets is who they paid and how they paid them. Some only pay the editor-in-chief while others pay everyone on staff. Who you can pay is undoubtedly tied to how much funding you have, which means you likely have to make decisions about who to pay and who not to pay. Here are some things to consider:

According to the College Board's Trends in Student Aid 2019, Black graduates had more cumulative debt than any other group. It also shows that Black and Hispanic households make less money than white households. There are a lot of students who have to work several jobs to afford pursuing their education. They may not have the time to work for your organization for free, while students who don't have to worry about paying rent or tuition can give you more of their time and energy.

Ultimately, when editor positions open up, they are often given to the white staff members who have the ability to commit many unpaid hours to the organization. Some of those editor positions may even be paid, continuing to perpetuate the inequality beyond just the staff level. These systemic issues ensure student journalists of color don't have access to these newsrooms, and even less access to advancement within them.

In 2021, the Asian American Journalists Association's Voices project produced a story on the state of students of color in college media organizations. Of the 73 student media editors they surveyed, less than 6% of Editors-in-Chief were Black and 11% were Latinx, both well under their respective proportion of the student population.

These reports make it clear that pay is a barrier for diversity in student media. So, when you're deciding what positions to fund, keep in mind how pay explicitly impacts the makeup of your staff and your organization's ability to reflect your entire campus community.

The Wesleyan Argus took a step to address this disparity. They don't pay their reporters, but do pay a couple senior roles. In 2020, they launched a fund to offer paid positions for low-income students of color on staff. Read more about it from Poynter.

Note: All of the following suggestions for retention are not in place of paying fair and equitable wages. They can be great morale and community builders, but they will not make up for an inequitable pay structure.

Professional development opportunities

There are many professional development opportunities you can provide your staff that give them a leg up in the next step of their career.

Here are just a few:
- Alumni speakers: Get in contact with your alumni and ask them to take an hour to talk to your staff about their job and career.
- Workshops and training: Offer workshops beyond the onboarding you do after hiring. Ask senior staff, professors, or alumni to teach your staff.
- Networking events: Bring in a panel of alumni or other industry professionals to do speed-networking and make connections.
- Attending conferences: If financially viable, send staff to conferences to meet other student journalists and bring new ideas back to your organization.
- Resume/cover letter review sessions: Bring in experts to review resumes and cover letters during internship or job hunting seasons.
- Mentorship programs: Digital Women Leaders has a great model that allows mentees to choose a mentor, allowing for more flexibility and choice.

Social events

Plan some (actually) fun events for your staff to participate in. This could be a collage night, participating in homecoming festivities, or going out for pizza after a meeting. Give people a sense of community so they keep coming back!
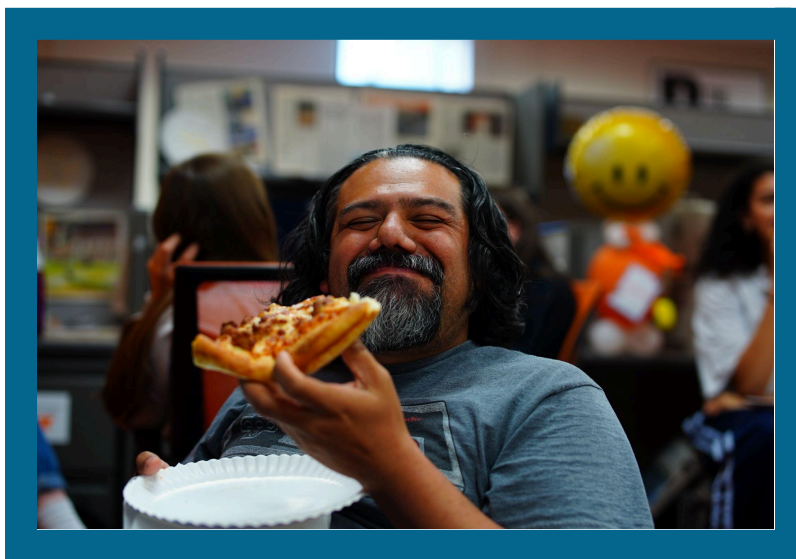

Photo courtesy of The Daily Beacon

Recognizing accomplishments

Submit your staff's work for as many awards as possible. Some require payment, so you'll have to weigh the cost with the impact of recognizing your staff's accomplishments on a state or national scale. Below is a list of some national awards you can submit work for. Don't forget state and local awards as well! Deadlines can change every year, so below are hyperlinks to get more information about each award.

- Society of Professional Journalists Mark of Excellence Awards
- Associated College Press Pacemakers
- Radio Television Digital News Association Student Murrow Awards
- Online News Association Student Journalism Award
- College Media Association Pinnacle Awards
- Investigative Reporters & Editors Student Awards

What other awards does your organization submit for? Leave a comment!

You can also plan your own awards event for the end of the year. Let staff vote on superlatives and bring alumni in to judge your content awards. In April 2023, Mizzou Student Media at the University of Missouri hosted our first ever end-of-year awards ceremony where we recognized staff accomplishments across all outlets and staff levels.

Photo by Cal Tobias/Mizzou Student Media, University of Missouri

Set up partnerships to publish work from intro J-school classes

Eagle News at Florida Gulf Coast University partners with introductory classes in their journalism program to give students the opportunity to get extra credit for pitching and producing stories for the campus newspaper. Each student gets to pitch three stories to the paper and after piloting this program two years ago, they've seen an increase in story production and a few of those students have joined the paper's staff following the experience.

Over the course of the 2023 spring semester, they published 29 stories from 12 students. They also piloted the program with the introductory audio/video journalism class as well. While they're still building that infrastructure, they published six packages from students in the class. Here's some of that work:

- [‘Students Cramming Into Them Like Sardines’: University Hammocks Being Overused Due to Popularity](#) by Kipp Greenwell
- [Student Leaders Connect with State Legislators in Tallahassee, Advocating for FGCU](#) by Asbaa Khan
- [Bradley Schemmel: Student, Media Influencer, Model](#) by Alex Cavalier

This set-up gives students' content a broader audience than just their professor, they get a byline and extra credit for class, and the outlet has more contributors. For the folks whose work gets published, the organization encourages them to join staff if they enjoyed their experience.

Offer assistant editor positions

Creating assistant editor positions for each desk or section on your staff has many benefits. If you're able to pay editors, this gives staff a step up toward the paid position and experience to succeed in it, recognizes them for their commitment and achievements, and gives your editor some extra support.

Offer service hours for content

At FGCU, undergraduate students need 80 service-learning hours to graduate. These hours require students to connect with and serve the community as part of the institution's commitment to service and civic engagement. Eagle Media has worked with the service program to get content creation for their outlet to count towards that total. Each story is worth three service-learning hours toward graduation.

If your university has any similar requirements, you could explore a partnership where students can receive another form of compensation for their work.

Maintaining progress toward long-term goals

Beginner's guide to documentation

Documentation is the key to long-term success in high-turnover environments like college media. Instead of having each editor and reporter reinvent the wheel each year or semester, start creating documents that each staff can build on instead of starting from scratch.

If you're the first person to start operational documentation for your organization, start with something simple like google docs. Amy Kovac-Ashley, a 2022 RJI Fellow whose project focused on leadership succession planning, suggests starting with something that feels relevant to you.

Do a little bit of documentation each week and remember that it's much easier to document as you go instead of doing it all on your way out of the organization.

If you're working with a team, order a pizza and spend an hour and a half filling out all of your documentation together. Here are some basics to start with:

- Personnel information: What is done by each role in the newsroom?
    - Everyone should fill out their section and get feedback from others
- Include source lists, editing tips, pitching guidelines
- Extra responsibilities: In addition to your job responsibilities on paper, what else have you done for the organization?
- Org Chart: What is the structure of your organization? Create a handy flowchart!

At Mizzou Student Media, we had a documentation template that each person on the executive board completed and we kept all of them in a Google folder that I transferred to my successor. Feel free to make a copy of this template and tweak it as necessary for your organization!

If you want to dive deeper into documentation and leadership succession planning, check out Amy's full guide and apply the aspects that work for your organization!

Part 3: Digital Transition

The transition away from print is not unique to student newsrooms, but it impacts student newsrooms differently. Some of these decisions are determined by cost, others by audience needs. In this section we'll break down how to make the decision to leave print behind and how to embrace your publication's new digital future.

Goodbye, print

Making the decision to divest from a print publication isn't an easy one and often isn't one you can make alone. It may take input from advisors, faculty, staff and other key stakeholders. If money is tight, it might not be your decision, however if moving away from print is a choice, it's important to get buy-in from everyone involved.

The key to making this decision is centering it around your audience, and to do that, you have to know the wants and needs of your campus community. We know the national trend is that Gen Z is getting their news from non-traditional sources and a very small percentage still pay for a print paper. However, it's still important to understand the behavior of your specific audience by doing research.

This research will help you understand the who, what, when, where, and how of your audience's content consumption. If you find that your print product just isn't reaching your audience, it may be time to pivot. Your college newsroom likely already has a website and social media accounts, so where else do you go when print's time is up? Keep scrolling...

Hello, digital!

Get to know your audience

This guide from the News Product Alliance walks through where to start with audience research and how to leverage your insights to create a digital product that best reaches your audience. This could be a newsletter, podcast, push alerts, an app, or leaning more into your existing website and social media accounts. Understanding how your audience wants to engage with your content will help you decide which of these to invest your time and money in.

In 2022, [The Atlantic concluded two years of audience research](#) and used what they learned to optimize how they distribute their journalism. With the insights from this research, they were able to tweak existing products and launch new strategies that better aligned with the audience's expressed wants and needs.

Build an infrastructure

Investing in digital doesn't mean just moving your money around. To launch successful digital products, you need a team. [This guide from NPA](#) outlines how to build a product team from scratch and develop your infrastructure to support your new products.

The Red & Black, the University of Georgia's independent, student-run newspaper, has developed an infrastructure that works for their digital-first newsroom. They have a digital managing editor and print managing editor who fall under the editor-in-chief. There are five desks under the digital managing editor and each desk has 1-3 paid staffers. These desks collaborate to connect content across the organization and help it reach the right audiences.
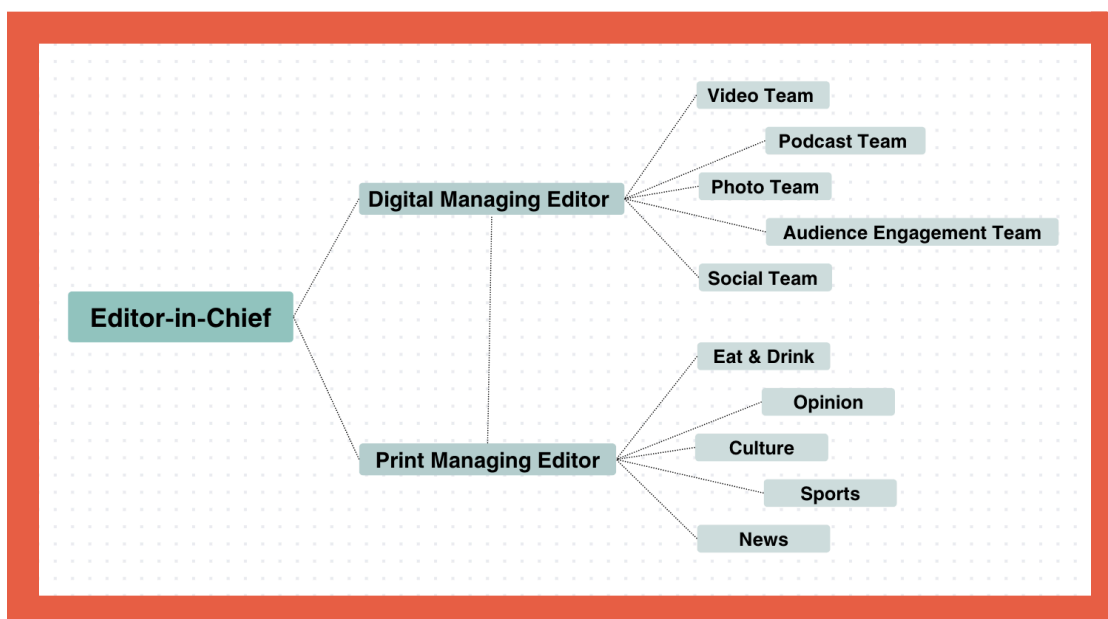
Launch new products

Now, you can't snap your fingers and launch a new product, but this is where you explore different tools and vendors and launch a new product based on the audience research you did! [This post from Julie Zhuo](#) walks you through how to launch a product from scratch. Keep in mind, this could be anything: newsletter, podcast, app, push alerts, etc.

Adjust to audience engagement and metrics

One of the many benefits of going digital is immediate feedback from your audience. This is more than just comments on your posts, this is the analytics you receive for each product.

Using these metrics, you can consistently assess your strategy and make changes where needed. The key here is to take a data-guided, not data-driven approach. A data guided approach means you don't blindly follow numbers, but instead use them to inform your future decisions, while also weighing other factors like newsworthiness, community impact, ethics, etc.

For example, just because one story about a crime relevant to your audience gets a lot of clicks on your site doesn't mean you should assign a reporter to listen to a police scanner 24/7.

One way The Red & Black uses analytics to inform their strategy is by sending a weekly newsletter-style analytics report to their entire staff, including all reporters, editors, advertising, and creative services. They break down the most important analytics, including the top five pages of the week (including pageviews), top stories from each desk (including pageviews), social media metrics, podcast analytics, and newsletter analytics.
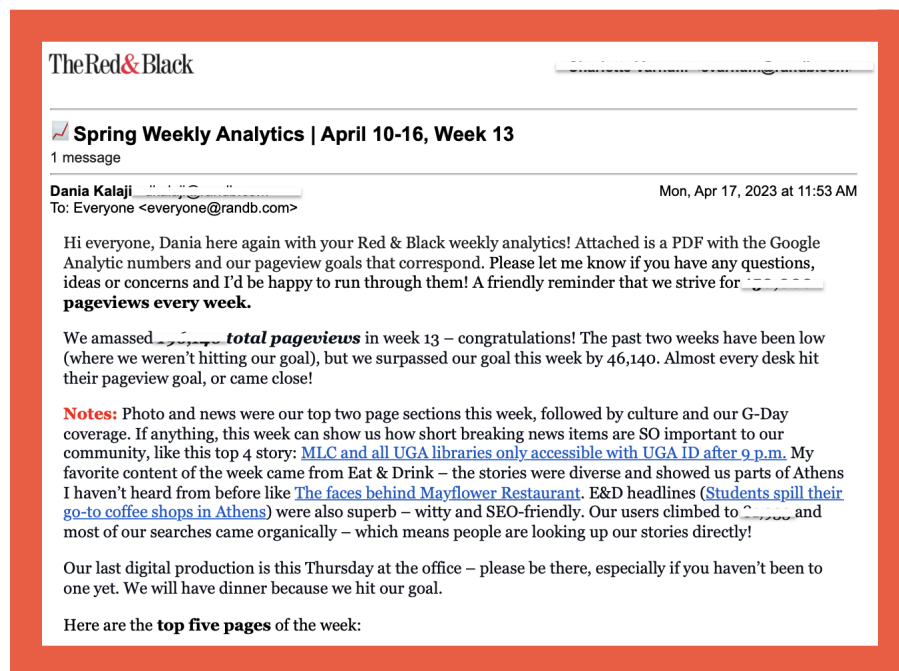
Courtesy of Charlotte Norsworthy Varnum. Numbers excluded for confidentiality.

An important part of this email is that they have set goals they're comparing metrics to each week. They have a weekly pageview goal across the site and each desk has its own goal that contributes to the overall number. Included in the email is a screenshot of how each desk performed compared to their goal for the current week and the week prior. They also attach their Google Analytics dashboard which shows more metrics like bounce rate, users, session duration and daily trends.

Deciding what analytics to value and share can be hard when each product gives you so much data. It's impossible to consider a new strategy or product successful when the whole team hasn't agreed on what metrics determine success. So, when starting to collect data, it's important to define your key performance indicators, or KPIs, and objectives and key results, or OKRs.

For example, when you are looking at your website's success, is it more important for you to have more sessions or more users? In other words, do you want users to come back for multiple sessions on your site or do you want to have a lot of users but don't care as much about how many sessions each one has? Your answers to questions like this can change as your organization and its strategies evolve.

When you decide what metrics and objectives are most important, it can help you steer your strategy in that direction. This guide from the News Product Alliance will help you understand and create your KPIs and OKRs from the start.

Keeping your digital progress going after you're gone

As we all know, we're short-term staff implementing long-term strategies, and it's important that progress keeps going once we're gone. Digital success doesn't happen overnight and takes consistent commitment year to year. It takes a renewed commitment by every new leader and when the vision falls out of focus, it's important to come back to the core of the strategies: your audience.

To prevent progress from stopping each year, Executive Director of The Red & Black Charlotte Norsworthy Varnum recommends leaning on long-term staff and conducting exit-style interviews with key digital players in the organization. In these interviews, you can document big changes and store it with all digital documentation so you have an institutional record of updates and changes.

Conclusion

This playbook was the result of a year of research, including talking to a lot of newsrooms who are doing many of these things successfully. This is a living document that can be updated, so if you have a suggestion or something to add, feel free to make a comment right here in the doc or send me a note at svlewis02@gmail.com. If you found something helpful here or even implemented something you read, I would love to hear about that too! And, if you're not yet in the coalition, make sure you join us by filling out this form.

Acknowledgements

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