Are journalism students up to code?

ECCLESIASTES put it this way: "There's nothing new under the sun."

I recall the Old Testament curmudgeon every time I come across another pundit proclaiming how journalism schools *must* teach every student "data-based journalism," how to wrangle "big data," and how to create "data visualizations" and "code."

It's not true.

I know, I was there the first time, in the mid-'90s, when we called it "computer-assisted reporting." We just knew that journalists everywhere would soon be hunkering over spreadsheets crunching city budget numbers or using database managers to mine secrets buried in political contribution data.

Alas, we were wrong.

We eventually conceded that not everyone is cut out to be a geek, just as not everyone is cut out to be a cops or sports or political reporter. But everyone needs to know when to seek a geek.

What goes around comes around. For example: Quill's January/February cover story was "Make 2014 the Year <You Learn to Code>," with the rationale that today's journalism jobs, especially the well-paid ones, are for folks we once called "programmers."

Eric Newton of the Knight Foundation told PBS that "a certain amount of coding ability and numeracy is mandatory. … A certain amount of, you might call it computational journalism — the ability to interrogate databases and interview algorithms."

The Atlantic's Olga Khazan asks, "Should Journalism Schools Require Reporters to 'Learn Code'?" and, bless her, answers "No."

Don't misunderstand; there is a place for journalist/programmers who can build Web pages and interactive graphics and code news apps. But there aren't enough places for everyone, nor should there be.

Lest I be dismissed as just another dinosaur:

• I registered my first CompuServe account in 1984, on a connection so slow I read email as it scrolled across the screen. (CompuServe, for readers under 40, was a pioneering online provider.)

• I got an Internet account a year later, a decade before Mosaic — the progenitor of today's browsers — made the Web point-and-click convenient, a decade before Yahoo (it stands for "Yet Another Hierarchical Officious Oracle," a sure bar-bet winner) debuted as 14 links on a white background.

• I did my first database journalism project in 1993, interrogating databases to analyze lobbyist gifts to New Jersey state senators, followed by a project on the cost of juvenile justice and a school report card for nearly 100 districts, complete with "data visualizations," then known as "charts."

• In 1996, I was training director with Investigative Reporters & Editors/National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting, for which I led seminars in 25 states and Canada.

I get it, I do. I get a changing industry confronting changing technology.

What I also get after three decades watching the industry seek salvation from neighbors sections, anecdotal leads, short stories, narrative stories, infographics or whatever magic the most recent consultant recommended, is that journalists (and journalism pundits and journalism schools) are like ravens.

Give a raven a shiny object, and it will love it forever. Give the raven another shiny object, and it'll drop the first and fall in love with the second.

That's a problem because we forget that aspiring journalists need to know about more than shiny objects.

They need to know about inverted pyramids, leads and nut grafs; how to cover crashes, fires and meetings; how to write obituaries and features; and what to do when a plane falls out of the sky on a Friday afternoon in August and the editors have left for the weekend.

The danger is we'll drop teaching those skills in favor of anything digital because J-schools can offer only so many classes, and shiny drives away dull. (Though I'm not sure how anything news-related is dull.)

There's another way.

Perhaps we should concede, as we proto-geeks did in the '90s, that coding, data wrangling and visualization aren't for everyone.

Rather, they're for students who enjoy coding, data wrangling and visualization. We can stipulate that there are uber-geek jobs out there that pay more than entry-level reporting jobs. And we should offer students the classes they need to get them.

But as electives, not as part of the core courses journalists need to do their jobs.

When we push all students toward geek-dom, we disserve the ones who want to be cops or sports or political reporters. We forget how many of us became journalists not for the money but — call us silly idealists — because it's a calling.

Journalism students need to know how to report and write solid stories. They need to know how to take pictures and shoot video. And they need to know the *basics* of data journalism, the *basics* of visualizations and the *basics* of coding a Web page. And they need to know when what

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Stay up-to-date on the latest digital media trends, skills and news with the Digital Media Committee's "Net Worked" blog at blogs.spjnetwork.org/tech. There you'll also see a calendar of upcoming digital media events.

troubling use of anonymous sources remains in the political and government arena. Last fall, New York Times public editor Margaret Sullivan criticized a reporter for referring to an anonymous

program allegedly was designed to force government employees to spy on other employees who might be leakers, as well as to increase prosecution of suspected leakers.

Yet Downie and Rafsky's bigger concern may have been that anything on the record is likely to be so "on point," so non-controversial, as to be worthless for any serious reporting. That's not good

Overall, though, the biggest and most troubling use of anonymous sources remains in the political and government arena. Last fall, New York Times public editor Margaret Sullivan criticized a reporter for referring to an anonymous national security source merely as "a U.S. official," a description she found so vague as to be meaningless.

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Former Washington Post executive editor Leonard Downie Jr. and researcher Sara Rafsky, in a 2013 special report for the Committee to Protect Journalists, linked a perceived rise in anonymous sourcing inside the beltway in recent years to President Barack Obama's so-called "Insider Threat Program." The

The authors documented six prosecutions by the Obama administration of government leakers, plus two contractors, including NSA leaker Edward Snowden. It may not sound like a great number, but it is an increase over all previous administrations. Various government spokesmen referenced in the report denied there is an effort to suppress the free flow of information by the Obama administration.

for a functioning democracy. One might as well be speaking to an apparatchik in the former Soviet Union or a director of communications for some multinational corporation. ❖

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NARRATIVE WRITING TOOLBOX

ing down and taking things out so the meaning would be clear."

He had to learn how to write a book proposal, but he knew so clearly what the book was about that he made a strong pitch. He sent the proposal out to 28 agents, found one who was interested and got a deal with New World Library, which is publishing the book in September.

Look at this book description, and you know exactly what it is about: *"'Bulletproof Spirit' describes emotional survival training and wellness initiatives to nurture, protect, and heal their mind, body, and spirit."* ❖

DIGITAL MEDIA TOOLBOX

they're doing might benefit from skills their nerd counterparts offer.

Journalism is a team effort.

Reporters, editors, photographers, page designers and, now, Web producers, videographers, programmers and others work together to create a product. Practitioners of each craft need to know the basics of the others.

But when coding becomes the shiny object that eclipses everything else, we risk creating journalists who know coding, but don't know how to cover news. ❖

ETHICS TOOLBOX

should be disclosed, so readers can draw their own conclusions about the information presented.

Readers similarly can reach their own assessments about any content that is provided by outside sources, whether someone pays for placement or not. It should be identified. Sponsored content — which long has been present in print and is becoming more common in digital journalism — should be clearly labeled as such.

Finally, where before a journalist was urged to "avoid bidding for news," the draft takes a stronger stand against checkbook journalism: "Do not pay for news or access."

BE ACCOUNTABLE

The first three principles in the Code come directly from a teaching module developed at the Poynter Institute. The 1995-96 Ethics Committee expanded on those principles, rearranged them slightly and then added a fourth: "Be Accountable."

It's the shortest section of the code, at 65 words, but it may be the most appropriate place to address the challenges facing journalism today. It can reinforce standards that will help consumers of news distinguish between responsible, reliable journalism and other sources that aren't as picky about accuracy and ethics, and aren't as responsive to their audiences.

In response to sentiment that journalism needs to be more transparent, we've proposed making the headline on this section "Be Accountable and Transparent." An edited introductory paragraph says "Journalists should be open in their actions and accept responsibility for them."

Language about corrections also has been updated, to include making corrections prominently in every place the mistake occurred, including archived material.

Rather than specifically address the sometimes rancorous nature of reader comments, we'd ask journalists to "encourage a civil dialogue" with readers and viewers. Comment sections may be a fad that loses favor, like those specific technologies that make the current Code outdated, and ought to be eliminated from an uncluttered statement of principles.

The suggested language ends up one word shorter than the current Code. ❖