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AJR Features



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Big Journalism On Campus

J-school students are producing high-level reporting that often makes its way into major news outlets. That's a welcome and important development at a time when the traditional media have reduced their staffs in the face of stiff economic pressures. Fri., December 2, 2011.

By **Leonard Downie Jr.**

Leonard Downie Jr. (downiel@washpost.com), Weil Family Professor of Journalism at Arizona State's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, is also vice president at large and former executive editor of the Washington Post.

Cantaloupes that made people ill were in the news this year. When the Food and Drug Administration temporarily stopped Del Monte Fresh Produce from importing cantaloupes grown in Guatemala and the company fought back in court, the unprecedented legal dispute over how the



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government investigates food-borne illness was widely covered in the media.

The most in-depth story, first published by the [Washington Post](#) and [washingtonpost.com](#) in [September](#), was written by two reporters who traveled to Guatemala, obtained key e-mails and other documents, interviewed federal, state and Guatemalan officials and confronted reluctant sources about the salmonella-tainted cantaloupe that sickened people in 10 states.

But the two reporters, Brandon Quester and Tarryn Mento, were not Washington Post staff members. They were graduate students at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Last summer, they joined 25 other student reporters from five universities--Arizona State, Maryland, Missouri, Nebraska and Harvard-- in an ambitious, foundation-supported [News21 national investigative reporting project on food safety](#). They worked under the direction of professional editors and faculty members, including myself, out of digital newsrooms at the Cronkite School in Phoenix and the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism in College Park.

The students' intensive experience on the multimedia investigative project accelerated their development as journalists and enhanced their prospects for future employment, while providing news outlets, among them the Washington Post and [msnbc.com](#), with timely account-ability journalism.

"I learned that sometimes answers don't come easy, especially when dealing with large government bureaucracies or private globalized companies," Quester told me. "The biggest lesson with this is to learn advanced reporting techniques, whether they are verifying information through former agency officials or relying on documents accessed through public records requests."

Altogether, the 27 student journalists produced dozens of stories, interactive graphics, photo galleries, videos and searchable databases showing how the nation's fragmented, underfunded and overwhelmed food safety system fails to prevent food-borne illnesses from striking tens of millions of Americans each year, killing thousands and hospitalizing hundreds of thousands more.

"I had no idea prior to the investigation how widespread the problems were," Harvard student journalist Mattea Kramer told [msnbc.com](#) about a story she co-authored that summarized the News21 investigation's findings.

Whitney Phillips, a Cronkite graduate student, interviewed a woman in New York and a boy in Prescott, Arizona, who had each survived serious illness caused by eating E. coli-contaminated spinach. "They both had the same message," she told me. "They ate what they thought was healthy food, and they expected that food to be safe." In her story, Jacob Goswick of Prescott, now 12, who

had [battled kidney failure after eating spinach](#) as a second grader, said, "I was definitely surprised how something so good could turn out so bad from a little bug you can't see."

Besides the opportunity to do professional-level investigative journalism, the News21 students gained publication and credit for their work in news media with national audiences. In addition to the Post and msnbc.com, their journalism appeared on the Center for Public Integrity Web site, iWatch News, and several other news sites, as well as the project's own multimedia site: [foodsafety.News21.com](#). It also was referenced in other media coverage of food safety, including an interview with Mento and Quester on NPR.

Media outlets that published journalism from this and other News21 student reporting projects were able to give their audiences credible, in-depth reporting on major stories affecting everyone at a time when their own resources for it were decreasing. None could devote anything like 27 journalists and half a dozen supervising editors to a single investigative reporting project.

During my many years at the Washington Post, editing and leading many of America's best and most experienced journalists, including numerous Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporters and editors, I could not have imagined working with journalism students on a project anywhere near this challenging. Nor would I have expected their work to be worthy of publication in the Post, whose large staff produced most of what had appeared in the paper.

But these were extraordinarily talented student journalists, the best from their respective universities, trained as I and my older colleagues never were in multimedia, from print and photography to video and the Web. They also had been taught well the still-relevant techniques and values of good reporting and storytelling by seasoned, often award-winning journalists now proliferating on the faculties of the top journalism schools. And most of the students had already worked on other ambitious reporting projects at their schools and done professional-level journalism at university-run news sites and local newspapers and broadcast stations and their Web sites.

What was most exciting for me was the fire in their belly. They really wanted to do accountability journalism, and they understood its importance for our society. The students saw the digital revolution, with which they had grown up, as offering limitless possibilities for journalism with impact. Rather than dwelling on the contraction occurring in parts of the news industry, they focused on new opportunities. They were just as comfortable in a video editing booth as at a computer keyboard. They had no difficulty shooting photos or video while reporting and writing. And they energetically worked very long hours.

Professional leadership was just as important for them as it is in any newsroom. The day-to-day editor for the News21 food safety project in the Cronkite School newsroom was Sharon

Rosenhouse, the no-nonsense retired managing editor of the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, who enforced high expectations for the student reporters while encouraging their own initiative. Among the Cronkite faculty working with her were Steve Doig, a Pulitzer Prize-winning computer-assisted reporting expert, and Kristin Gilger, associate dean at Cronkite and former deputy managing editor at the Arizona Republic. The Maryland newsroom was supervised by Merrill College faculty members Deborah Nelson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter and editor; Sandy Banisky, a former deputy managing editor at the Baltimore Sun; and Sean Mussenden, a former multimedia reporter and editor in the Washington bureau of Media General newspapers.

As I moved between the two newsrooms as their consulting editor, I realized this accountability journalism, about a subject vital to everyone, was as important as much of what I had been involved in at the Washington Post. And it was being done just as well. I also realized how important it could be for embattled traditional news organizations that now are more ready, even eager, to make use of credible journalism produced by nonprofits, including universities, that enriches what they can provide their audiences with smaller staffs.

The Post and washingtonpost.com published six stories from the News21 food safety project--edited to fit their news space--about salmonella contamination of chicken and eggs, the dangers of cantaloupe, limitations on federal inspection of imported food, safety and regulatory issues at local farmers markets, and the disparity among states in their investigations of outbreaks of food-borne illness.

"It was a way for us to expand our coverage of a topic much on the minds of our readers," says Claudia Townsend, the Post's national editor for health, science and environment. She found the News21 stories "well done and comprehensive" and the student reporters knowledgeable about their subjects and professional about the editing process.

Msnbc.com featured highlights of the investigation and stories about unsafe fish, inadequate inspection of imported food and the lack of evidence that locally grown produce from small farms sold at farmers markets--exempt from government regulation--is any safer than other food. IWatch News and several nonprofit news sites also posted many of these stories, along with others about antibiotics and pesticides in food.

"The students at News21 took a deep look at an issue that affects everyone □ what they put on their plates," says Linda Dahlstrom, msnbc.com's health editor. "Their engaging pieces, crafted from careful and intrepid reporting, made a direct difference in the lives of msnbc.com readers."

The food safety reporting project is part of the 6-year-old News21 summer program of innovative accountability journalism projects at a dozen participating universities. It is headquartered at the

Cronkite School and funded by the Carnegie Corporation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

News organizations across the country have published stories from individual journalism schools' News21 projects on education, the environment, aging, health, nutrition and immigration. News21 reporting by students at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism about aging Americans appeared in the Washington Post. Nutrition and food labeling stories by graduate journalism students at the University of California, Berkeley were published by the Seattle Times and New York Times. The Arizona Republic and USA Today ran stories about Latino immigrants by students at Arizona State's Cronkite School and the Newhouse School at Syracuse University. Reporting by Maryland students on Chesapeake Bay environmental issues appeared in the Baltimore Sun.

The first national News21 project was an [investigation of transportation safety in the U.S.](#), produced by students from 11 universities working out of the Cronkite School newsroom during the summer of 2010. Many of its 23 stories were published by the Washington Post, the Arizona Republic, msnbc.com, Yahoo! News and the Center for Public Integrity, among others. They drew more than 5 million pageviews in the first 18 days of distribution-- the largest-ever readership of university-produced journalism.

Eric Newton, senior adviser to the president of the Knight Foundation, says Knight funded the News21 projects "to show that top students could do journalism desired by the nation's most important news organizations and innovate at the same time" with multimedia and interactive presentation.

In fact, News21 is part of a movement by a leading group of professionally oriented university journalism schools to produce local, regional and even national journalism that can help fill coverage gaps left by the shrinking of newspaper and television news staffs. As their eroding advertising bases force them to continue cutting costs, for-profit news media are increasingly collaborating with local, regional and national nonprofit digital news sites funded by foundations and other donors and sponsors, including universities, to publish and broadcast stories they can no longer afford to produce on their own. (See "[The Nonprofit Explosion](#)," Fall 2010.)

A notable local digital nonprofit news site, the [Voice of San Diego](#), shares its accountability journalism about public affairs in that city with the local NBC-TV affiliate. A regional nonprofit, the Center for Investigative Reporting's [California Watch](#), distributes its award-winning investigative reporting for a modest fee to dozens of newspapers and broadcast stations throughout California. Nationally oriented nonprofits ProPublica, based in New York City, and the Center for Public Integrity, based in Washington, D.C., collaborate on investigative reporting with news media throughout the country.

In joining them and other nonprofit news providers, universities can both teach and produce journalism in ways that benefit their students and their communities □ just as their teaching hospitals both educate future physicians and provide health care.

In a [Nieman Journalism Lab](#) essay, Newton focused on the opportunity and need for universities to supplement diminished local news media--especially in watchdog reporting--and to incubate innovations in digital news.

"The nation's institutions of higher learning have an important role to play in the local news crisis," he wrote, adding they "could unlock the potential of more than 200,000 journalism and mass communication students to help underserved communities."

At the Cronkite School, students staff Cronkite News Service bureaus in both Phoenix, the state capital, and Washington, D.C., which serve about 30 newspapers, broadcast stations and news Web sites throughout Arizona, plus the Associated Press and the McClatchy news service. CNS deploys the largest number of reporters covering Arizona state government, and it has the Arizona news media's only Washington bureau. In addition, the school's half-hour "Cronkite NewsWatch" programs provide local and state news, including CNS reports from Washington, four nights a week to viewers of Arizona's largest public television station, which is owned by Arizona State and operates out of the Cronkite School's state-of-the-art multimedia building in downtown Phoenix.

"We constantly hear from our media clients that we enhance the pool of information for their audiences by covering what the other news media aren't covering," says Steve Elliott, a Cronkite professor and former AP bureau chief in Phoenix who is director of CNS.

Similarly, Maryland's Merrill College supplies news and video to most of the state's newspapers and television stations and their Web sites from its student-staffed Capital News Service bureaus in College Park, Washington and the state capital of Annapolis. Some of its stories also appear on the Web sites of McClatchy newspapers across the country.

Sean Mussenden, now a multimedia editor and bureau chief on the faculty in College Park, says the students' journalism regularly appears "in every small newspaper in Maryland because they don't have staffs in the statehouse or Washington."

Northwestern's Medill School has news bureaus in Washington and Chicago. The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, New York University and the City University of New York each operate student-staffed news bureaus and neighborhood blogs in New York City boroughs. The USC Annenberg School for Journalism & Communication conducts news reporting experiments ranging from a digital Los Angeles news site to coverage of California health issues. At some of the schools, students also work at local professional news media as part of the school's curriculum.

Florida International University collaborates with the Miami Herald, the Palm Beach Post and the Sun-Sentinel in the South Florida News Service. And there are investigative reporting projects involving student journalists at Columbia, Northeastern, Boston, Wisconsin and American universities, among others, which partner with local and national print and broadcast outlets. In October, Columbia launched a digital news site, named the New York World in honor of the school's founder, Joseph Pulitzer, to cover local government. Student journalists and recent graduates, including post-doctoral fellows, will produce stories and databases for the site and other New York news media.

Most of these programs are supervised by seasoned professional journalists on the faculties of the J-schools. They take advantage of their schools' resources and infrastructures, with support from foundations and other donors. Students often receive class credit for their work, although sometimes it is an extracurricular activity, a graduate assistantship or an internship, paid or unpaid.

For the News21 national project, I teach a teleconferenced spring seminar from the Cronkite School on that year's investigative reporting topic. Students chosen for the project use the seminar to research the subject, interview expert sources and develop project themes and story ideas. They then work on stories, photography, video, digital graphics and the Web site in the newsroom during the summer.

During the nearly eight months I worked with student journalists and faculty editors on the food safety project, I was impressed by how the students collaborated in teams to do their research and reporting, becoming expert about what they were investigating, as well as producing the photography, video and other multimedia elements they added to their stories. They seemed to learn nearly as much from each other as they did from their editors and the multimedia specialists on the schools' faculties. I was impressed by their energy, determination, maturity, and sense of mission and fairness, and their digital media skills. The ways they worked and the journalism they produced would fit right in with what I would expect from the best reporters and editors during my years of running the Washington Post newsroom.

For example, Cronkite School students Max Levy and Dustin Volz worked with Missouri student Joe Yerardi, Cronkite professor Doig and other multimedia faculty to develop from government records a News21 database of the disparities among the 50 states in how they diagnose and report outbreaks of food-borne illness to the federal government. They used it and extensive interviews with federal and state officials to report the [story published by the Post](#) about how those disparities hinder authorities in identifying the sources of outbreaks before they spread throughout the country. An interactive version of the database on the News21 food safety Web site also enables readers to check on their own states' performance.

"We learned how the government food safety bureaucracy works and how the federal government works with the states," Levy told me. By doing team research and in-depth reporting in the spring

seminar and summer newsroom, he says, the student reporters "became comfortable talking to people at the CDC [the U.S. Centers for Disease Control]" and collaborating on technically challenging stories.

Former Maryland grad student Maggie Clark says the food safety reporting project was "a once-in-a-career chance to spend months on one topic, become an expert, have the full support of a newsroom to go out and travel and report in the field."

"We scoured records, worked the phones. We probably called everyone in the country who's ever been associated with food safety," says Maryland grad student (and former AJR editorial assistant) Jeffrey Benzing, who reported on salmonella contamination of chicken. "Then we got our hands dirty out on the farm and in the slaughterhouse. We got to see, smell and hear what most people never think of when they sit down to dinner."

In all, half a dozen Maryland students were assigned by their lead editor, Merrill faculty member Deb Nelson, to investigate persistent salmonella contamination of food.

"The spring seminar's research pointed to salmonella as a leading cause of food-borne illness, and recent studies showed it also was the most intractable," Nelson said in an e-mail interview.

"Because the problem was so big, we decided to divide it into the most troublesome food groups--poultry, eggs and produce. Judah Gross, Jeff Benzing, Esther French and Robynne McCullough visited chicken farms, processing plants, trucks and grocery stores and then identified industry practices and government policies at each step of the way that allowed the pathogen to survive and proliferate. Mattea Kramer investigated salmonella in eggs and found solutions that were both effective and inexpensive, yet had not been widely adopted by industry. Emily Hooper, who followed the salmonella in produce, came to a perhaps more disconcerting conclusion: We're not entirely sure how produce gets contaminated or how to prevent it.

"When the group sat around the conference table to share their findings," Nelson added, "they found their divergent trails ended at the same place: Consumers are left holding the bag. I think this realization highlighted for them the importance of investigative reporting's role in informing the public." They also took seriously their responsibility to get the story right. At their editors' direction, as in any newsroom doing ambitious accountability journalism, students in the Cronkite and Merrill newsrooms made extra phone calls, did follow-up interviews, searched for more records, reanalyzed databases, did extensive fact-checking, rewrote stories, redrafted graphics and reedited photo galleries and video right up to the time of publication and the launch of the project's Web site.

"Beyond investigating the issue of food safety," Tarryn Mento explained in a blog post about the challenges of the contaminated cantaloupe story, "the project really allowed us to gain a full understanding, from the beginning to the end, as to how the investigation process works for journalists." Knight and Carnegie have joined with Arizona State to fund the News21 national

reporting project for the next decade. Selected students from universities throughout the country will be eligible to participate in the spring seminar and the summer newsroom at the Cronkite School. Bill Marimow, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner as an investigative reporter and the former editor of the Baltimore Sun and the Philadelphia Inquirer, has joined the Cronkite School to supervise the News21 newsroom as its executive editor.

Marimow says he wants to help News21 reporters to "learn the classic tools of journalism in a digital age" and "inform readers about issues of national and what I call governing importance."

That mission is especially important as the ongoing reconstruction of American journalism continues to undermine the economic models of for-profit news media. At the same time, the digital revolution has made possible exciting new opportunities for gathering and sharing news, including a growing number of nonprofit digital news operations of varying kinds. Most of these startups, dependent on foundations and other donors, remain financially fragile and are searching for ways to build audience and sustain themselves, including partnering with for-profit media that can use their reporting. I believe their survival is vital to the future of American accountability journalism.

Universities, despite their own financial challenges, can help provide nonprofit sustainability and produce professional-level journalism and digital news innovation. They can collaborate with both for-profit and nonprofit news media. Those that hold public broadcasting licenses, as many do, can steadily transform their public radio and television stations into platforms for local news. Journalism schools, too many of which have retreated into academic isolation, can play the same productive and developmental role in news coverage as other professional schools do in medicine, business, law, engineering, science and technology. This is their time to make a difference.

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