

Refereed Articles: Student Newspapers

Running a Newspaper for Journalism Students. By David Venables, Massey University

This short paper outlines Massey University/Wellington Polytechnic's experience in setting up and maintaining a student newspaper for budding reporters and media stars. It describes why the paper was set up, how it is organised, and what we see as the benefits of having a paper. Issues addressed include assessing students' performance on the paper and the level of staff involvement. This paper is written with a view to encouraging other courses to undertake similar ventures.

The beginning

Magneto was set up in 1994 by staff of the then Wellington Polytechnic journalism programme. Its name came from Magnet, a regular newsheet put out by the students' association. No flashes of brilliance there, I'm afraid. Journalism staff wanted the paper because it would give students a real, yet safe, environment to start work in. It also gave them an outlet for their own interests, e.g. arts. Magneto also gave the students a practical environment in which to do newspaper layout and photography, as well as providing another publishing outlet for material that didn't quite fit the mainstream papers' mould.

Magneto has been produced with seven issues a year for the past seven years. It has never missed an issue. It is evenly spread through the academic year, with issues coming out every five or six weeks. The first two editions of each year are put together by either the students' association or a student from the previous year. The class then put out the remaining five issues.

Value of Magneto

Looking back, the greatest value of Magneto is probably its group-building function and the consequent learning re newsroom processes. Five times during the year the students cooperate on a single task for a sustained two-week period. Despite the lack of course credit given for their work (beyond some credit for publishing stories and photos), a huge effort goes into each issue. Some students stay up all night out of sheer pride and perhaps obsession.

They learn that for a paper to come out everyone has to do their bit. They also learn that if they want to have a paper at all, someone has to sell advertising. The students' association provides money for a basic 20-page black-and-white paper, but the students inevitably go to 24 pages, 28 and beyond, and they also want lots of colour. As a result, some of their classmates have to sell ads.

They also learn that when people miss deadlines, this has a downstream effect. Everyone gets squeezed and subbing, layout or production staff suddenly find they have to work into the night to catch up. In practice, journalism staff have rarely had to step in and talk to recalcitrant students. However, this is not because everyone pulls their weight, but because students tend to avoid confronting uncooperative or poorly performing colleagues.

The fact that after seven years new classes still get excited about doing Magneto indicates that it is a good idea. Every year, new people step up to take on the big jobs, their enthusiasm no less than that of their predecessors. Magneto provides opportunities for students to excel in areas that are elsewhere studied at only a basic level: page layout, use of Pagemaker and Photoshop, newspaper design and use of colour and images, photography and editorial leadership. For a few students, their time on the newspaper is the best part of the programme because their real ambition is to produce publications.

Magneto has huge payoffs for staff as well. Watching students take pride in completing a job is a great buzz. Often the final product is as flawed as any other newspaper, but lecturers are secure in the knowledge that a great deal of learning has occurred and that many students have had a strongly positive experience. Magneto work also tells staff who the real stars are, who delivers and who doesn't. Every year there are people on the programme whose academic performance is mixed, but whose attitudinal performance on the paper is excellent. In these cases, staff are able to get a true picture of the student's skills.

How it all works

As stated above, the first two issues of each year are completed by the students' association, often using former students. The journalism class does the next five. The first of this group of five is done by the whole class, the next three by each of the three tutorial groups of 15 students in turn, with the last issues falling back on the class as a whole. Issues come out every five or six weeks, with the bulk of the work falling into the two-week period immediately before the publication date.

Each issue is led by an editor, who is selected by the Magneto board of control, which typically consists of a journalism staff member, the students' association president and another students' representative selected by the president. Each issue has a different editor and editorial top table, the emphasis being on getting as many students as possible to take part at all levels. The editor's job is to take full responsibility for the paper, to direct staff and ensure that all parts of the operation perform so that the paper comes out.

The editor then calls for applications for the various positions on the paper: senior editorial roles, design/production, advertising, reporting, photography, etc. The editor makes his/her own decisions based on the applications, sometimes in consultation with staff. Staff sometimes advise the editor to approach specific individuals for specific jobs. This is done where it is believed that capable people are undervaluing themselves by not applying. No positions are paid.

The senior editorial staff appointed are as follows:

- Design editor, who determines, in consultation with the editor, what the paper will look like, choosing fonts, etc, and taking responsibility for laying out special pages such as photo spreads. This person is the computer whiz, who knows Pagemaker and Photoshop. They also control the scanning of photos and manage the production end of things. The latter role could be split off, but it has proved most efficient to keep the two together. This job is the busiest after the editor's. It requires a methodical, thorough person, though not necessarily someone with extensive computer experience as those skills can be readily picked up by the right person.
- Business manager, who keeps the accounts and sells ads where necessary. Usually busy early on and then less so later. Most important function, besides balancing the books, is probably tracing the ads through the process to guard against screw-ups.
- Illustrations editor, who manages the photographers (typically two or three an issue), ensuring the pix meet deadline.
- Section editors, who run the various parts of the paper, e.g. news, opinions, features, sports, arts. Each of these has a team of reporters and is responsible for making sure that copy deadlines are met. The news editor's job is typically the busiest.
- Subs-editors, who, rather unsurprisingly, edit stories once they have been checked by section editors. All queries should go to section editors.
- Page editors, who use Pagemaker to lay out the newspaper. They are assigned to section editors and focus on laying out specific pages.
- Photographers and reporters = no prizes at all for guessing what these guys do.

The editor for each issue starts the appointment process as soon as the previous issue comes out. Preliminary meetings are held to brainstorm ideas and assign stories. The bulk of the work comes in the last two weeks of the cycle. The first week contains the copy deadlines. Layout/production takes place in the second week, with time left for finalised pages to be read by staff and the publisher (the students' association) before being sent for printing. The final reading generally takes two to three hours.

How much time is involved?

Our aim with Magneto is to involve as many students as possible, largely to spread the workload. We require each student to work on two issues during the year, including in one non-reporter role. Some do the minimum, e.g. one stint as a reporter, one as a sub, but others become involved in every issue and devote huge numbers of hours to the paper. Journalism staff need to be careful that such devotees don't fall behind in other work. A sign of the attitude of some students is the fact that the last issue has always come out despite the looming pressure of exams.

Two full weeks are set aside in the programme for Magneto work leading up to the final publication date of each issue. The only classes scheduled in these weeks are shorthand and guest speaker spots.

Staff input

When Magneto is humming along, staff input is limited to regular consultations with the editor. The head of journalism, or another assigned lecturer, meets with the editor early in each cycle to check that he/she has organised meetings, appointed staff, mapped out a set of deadlines, and is aware of production issues, etc. Often staff offer story ideas for consideration, though the editor has the final say in what is to be covered. Staff have written a full set of notes about Magneto for students and also provide extra Pagemaker tuition where required.

Apart from checking on progress over the weeks, staff input is low unless a problem is struck, e.g. staff relationship problems, advice on stories. Currently, a staff member carries out the final pre-press formatting to ensure no mistakes are made. This makes more sense than having to train a student for each issue. An alternative would be for a student with fairly advanced production knowledge to do this for the whole year. Pre-press work generally takes two to four hours. We do not need to do the pre-press work, but it saves money.

Staff check the completed pages for legal and ethical problems and make suggestions accordingly. The students' association president, who represents the publisher, also reads the pages. Issues do crop up, but rarely is anything changed for other than legal reasons. We have found that student politicians learn a fair bit about how the media works during this process.

Apart from in the very early days, staff have traditionally stood back from Magneto, allowing students to experiment, producing their own look and feel to the paper. This year, however, we have tried to get the students to adopt a more regular look, with a consistent banner and news focus. This has been done to try and create an identity for Magneto among readers. We were also concerned that the learning outcomes relating to Magneto were being overlooked, i.e. that students will gain experience in working on a news paper that bears some relationship to the real world. Editors have thus far been happy to go with this approach, leaving their more creative instincts for the inside features section.

Another change this year is to have one lecturer primarily responsible for the paper over the whole year. In the past, different staff members have often taken the lead when their own tutorial groups have been responsible for the paper. This has, however, tended to hinder the development of a "look" for Magneto. It is also easier for the students if they know that one lecturer is the Magneto contact person for all issues.

Assessing students' performance

Attached is a copy of the assessment form we use for Magneto work. As you can see, it is very simple and does not attempt to allocate marks to a student's performance. We require only that students participate in two issues to the standard indicated.

Students are assessed by their supervisor on the newspaper, with the editor being assessed by the head of journalism. An unsatisfactory assessment sees a student having to be involved in an extra issue. Such negative assessments are occasionally made, although students tend to be very easy on each other, preferring to avoid conflict.

Students get course credit for any stories or photos that are published in Magneto, but they get

nothing extra for taking on the really busy roles. In practice, though, carrying out the editor's job on Magneto is sufficient grounds for being granted an extension to an assignment deadline. This lack of significant course credit for Magneto seems to have never had a dulling effect on participation in the senior jobs. Staffing can get tight when final exams approach, though the paper always comes out.

The big issues to watch for

For a paper to work, there must be enough bodies on the ground. There will be those who are happy to make it a real project and stay up all night, but lots of others are needed to do stories, take pix, distribute the paper, etc.

Lots of time is also needed. We have always allocated two-week blocks so that students can focus on the paper in the crucial final stages. Staff also need to be prepared to step in if needed. We get the students to do everything on Magneto. They prefer it that way so that it becomes their baby, but if something goes wrong, we have to be prepared to make ourselves available, overnight if necessary. Our main role often comes down to maintaining the computer network and troubleshooting. If the students have a problem at 8pm, you can't get central computer support people out of bed; you will probably have to solve the problem, or at least come up with a temporary solution on your own.

Students need to have control (and responsibility) if they are to be expected to really commit to their paper. We have tried in recent years to refocus Magneto on news, but this has made sense to editors and we have had no problem selling this approach to the class. Under our model of mass student participation staff have had to take responsibility for keeping file copies of the paper and collecting financial or production documents from editors. In our experience students are notoriously bad at this sort of thing. Once their issue is done, most seem to wash their hands of such unpleasant details as filing master copies of papers. However, these are needed.

At least one clever computer type is needed per issue – someone who really wants to get into Photoshop and Pagemaker, someone who can understand the need to properly organise files on the network so that everything is in its place come production time. Few students get excited at this sort of stuff, but you do need at least one card-carrying computer nerd in the class.

In our experience, the way to put out a newspaper is to get students to want to do it. Once they see that others have done it, new groups seem motivated to give it a go. Of course, there are many more models than the one presented here. One thing we haven't yet done is put Magneto online, which would not be too difficult. The main stumbling block is (euphemism alert!) "institutional issues".

Here is a final list of what we see as the key issues you need to consider:

- A newspaper should be a learning tool, not just fun. It is a lot of work to produce a paper, so you should make sure you get your academic money's worth out of the exercise.
- Don't get ambitious. Forget a weekly or even fortnightly paper. Make sure that you can produce a regular publication over a longer period first. Magneto forms a large part of our current programme, but not so much that it interferes with other teaching and work experience. Also, it is at a level where we are certain that in any given year we can deliver our promised five student editions.
- Limit staff responsibility. We have placed staff at arm's length on Magneto. The students' association is the publisher/owner, with staff advising the workers and providing legal advice. This gives us some protection if the university takes issue with a story.
- Who pays? Magneto is produced for under \$2000 of students' association money per issue. Students increase this amount by selling ads, but they do not have to do this. Many years ago, the Wellington Polytechnic journalism course ran a wee paper on which students had to sell advertising. This caused resentment. We have found that if ad-selling is optional, some students are happy to do it in order to improve the look and size of the publication.
- Editorial freedom. The editor has to be given authority to make decisions. Staff will say if something presents an ethical problem, but the editor is free to disregard that advice. Regarding legal issues, staff are more assertive in making their feelings known. The final decision on publication, though, rests with the students' association.

We are keen to share our experience with Magneto. The best-case scenario, as we see it, would be for journalism schools to be able to run an annual competition for the best paper.

