

# Continuity and Change

## Perspectives on Journalism & Communication Education

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Journalism provides  
 draft of history  
 Communication  
 improves understanding  
 Education creates future

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## "Don't Track Them"

—An interview with Dr. Steve Jones

Chair, Department of Communication, University of Illinois at Chicago

Xin Zhong    Xiangcai Li    Ling Xu

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### Profile of the Interviewee: Happiest in the Classroom

**Gazetteer:** Your experiences with computing dated back to 1979, when you worked for the PLATO System at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. What does the PLATO stand for? Was it your part time job when you were still a university student?

**Jones:** PLATO stands for "Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations". My job was writing some of the text and educational materials for courses that were taught using PLATO. The programming was not at all difficult, it was in some ways akin to BASIC and FORTRAN, but my recollection is that changes to the operating system were continually being made that caused us to have to re-learn the programming, and to have to revise already existing programs and lessons.

**Gazetteer:** Do you encourage your students to do part time job?

**Jones:** I neither encourage nor discourage them. Usually they come to me with their minds made up! In my experience over the last 20 years, more and more students have part time jobs. These range from very "basic" jobs like doing deliveries or waiting table at a restaurant to being writers, web designers and actors. Name the type of job, and there is probably a student doing it part time.

**Gazetteer:** You had a B. S. in Biology and a M. S. in Journalism. Why did you

make the switch? Which major benefits you more in your career?

**Jones:** As I was progressing in the biology program I quickly realized that it was less of a "pure science" program and more one that was preparing students for medical school. I was not interested in medicine. In the meantime I had begun writing for the student newspaper, and for several national music magazines, and had developed a strong interest in journalism. The biology program really has not had a great influence in my career. However, it did teach me much about the scientific method specifically, and about science generally, which I do find useful.

**Gazetteer:** I read that: "Jones' s interests in technology and policy are also evident in his research into popular music, youth culture and communication. His first book, *Rock Formation: Technology, Music and Mass Communication* was nominated for the BMI/Rolling Stone Gleason Award and the Association for Recorded Sound Collections Excellence in Historical Recorded Sound Research Award." When did you get interested in music?

**Jones:** I was interested very early in my life. My mother encouraged me to learn the piano, and I had about ten years of classical piano training as a child. As long as I can remember I' ve enjoyed music of all kinds. However, it was not until my teenage years that I became seriously interested in making music, writing about music, and in the technology of music making and listening.

**Gazetteer:** What made the book win the awards?

**Jones:** I don' t know! If I knew why it won awards I might try to write more like it! Any awards I have won (note that this book was nominated, but did not win, the awards) were achieved somewhat "unconsciously", that is, I have never really paid attention to gaining awards, but have been very honored when I am given them.

**Gazetteer:** What about the present situation of American pop music publishing industry?

**Jones:** I am not quite sure how to respond, as this is a very general question in some ways. The publishing industry perse is only one part of the music industry overall, and not one that is very clear to most people, as it revolves around "behind the scenes" matters such as contracts and legal issues. The general state of the music industry is good, although there is much consternation among the major record labels about piracy and illegal downloading of music. Nevertheless, there seems to be more music available of more types than ever before, and record companies are learning how to make a business of online and digital music.

**Gazetteer:** I read from your introduction that you serve on the Association of Internet Researchers. You are also the research consultant of the website "Americangreetings.

com". What issues does the Association of Internet Researchers concern about in recent years?

**Jones:** The association is comprised of nearly 1 000 scholars from dozens of disciplines and dozens of countries. There are many, many issues with which the members are engaged, ranging from matters of methodology to ethics, from policy to theory. The best way to get a sense of it is to look at <http://aoir.org> and to read some of the information about its conferences and conference programs.

**Gazetteer:** What do you usually do for Americangreetings.com as a research consultant?

**Jones:** At this point, nothing my work for them was for a single project, examining the use of the Internet and E-mail for sending greetings and greeting cards.

**Gazetteer:** You have to teach, do research and manage your department. Which takes priority?

**Jones:** In some ways they all share a priority. I am probably happiest in the classroom, teaching, interacting with students, and working on research, and probably less inclined, as time goes on, to engage administrative work. Conversely, it is probably administrative work that benefits the department most

## The Department: Blocking Blocks vs. Skills

**Gazetteer:** You state that: "The Department of Communication provides a curriculum that helps students learn how to learn, rather than teach students what to think. Since communication and communication technologies continually change, the curriculum is based on modes of inquiry rather than narrowly focused communication skills likely to be outdated within a few years." Would you please elaborate more on your "modes of inquiry?"

**Jones:** "Modes of inquiry" means that we value all types of methods, theories and practices. However, our department does not provide any lab experience or hands on practice. The main reason we do not is that, as we are located in the heart of Chicago, our students have many opportunities to do internships and work at media organizations. We have found that our students learn skills better "on site" than they do in the classroom.

**Gazetteer:** What kind of hands on practice do the communication students usually have?

**Jones:** Whatever skills they acquire. We really teach very little skills-wise in the curriculum. Most communication programs seem to have as their goal that students, upon

graduating, should get an entry-level job. Our goal is different. We believe that they can gain an entry-level job with the practical experience they get from working and from internships. Our goal is to teach them things, such as research, critical thinking, management, that can help them get out of those entry-level jobs as quickly as possible, and allow them to move up into higher paying and more interesting jobs. Entry level jobs do not pay well enough to even cover the costs of the education they have received.

**Gazetteer:** Do your faculty and students complain about insufficiency and/or outdated lab facilities?

**Jones:** We don't have a lab. Well, we have a small computer lab, but it is regularly upgraded. In the lab in which I do my own research, the Electronic Visualization Lab, the equipment is up to date, and often beyond, on the cutting edge. But as to communication education, again, my philosophy is that the profession ought to be helping us to "train" students. Thus it is necessary for them to provide internships and other work opportunities for our students.

Let me put it this way. When I was chair of the department of communication at the University of Tulsa, I was approached by a newspaper editor who told me that we should be teaching a course on PageMaker and teaching the graphic style used at his newspaper. I asked him if he believed that all of our students would work for his newspaper. "Of course not" he said. In that case, I wondered, why should we teach all of our students something that they may not use?

Our students will encounter many tools, many computers, computer programs, operating systems, throughout their careers. My goal is not to train them in every possible one, which is anyway impossible, but to give them the building blocks with which they can very rapidly learn new things as they need the knowledge.

**Gazetteer:** If your students are good at "how to learn", but not good at hands on operation, will they be competitive in the labor market?

**Jones:** It depends on the jobs they wish to get. However, in general, if they are not good at learning, they will not be competitive, no matter the job.

**Gazetteer:** Based on your teaching method, what are some representative courses you offer to graduate students. Please name some required courses and optional courses.

**Jones:** Here is a list of courses I have taught that are representative of my teaching the last few years:

- Analysis of Media
- Communication and Sound
- \* Communication Technologies
- Cyberspace & Cybermyths: Critical Perspectives of the Internet

Feature Writing

Information, Technology and Society

\* Introduction to Communication

Issues in Communication and the Internet

Magazine Editing & Design

\* Mass Communication & Society

Mass Media Research

Mass Media Writing (Advertising, Journalism & Public Relations)

Media History

Principles of Internet Research

Seminar in Internet Studies

I have put a " \* " by the ones that are required.

**Gazetteer:** What are some differences between undergraduate courses and graduate courses? In my school, many students complain that there is not much difference between the two levels. For example, an editing and reporting class for both graduates and undergraduates are similar because both are taught by the same professor. Do you have such problems?

**Jones:** Our curricula are almost entirely different. Our graduate students can take no more than two courses at the "400" (senior) undergraduate level. The "500" level graduate courses bear virtually no resemblance to undergraduate courses, and involve considerably more reading, writing and thinking. Furthermore, we do not encourage our undergraduate students to apply to our own graduate program, believing that we will learn more from interacting with new professors at another institution.

**Gazetteer:** According to your understanding and observation, what is the major difference between courses for communication students and courses for journalism students?

**Jones:** I am not particularly convinced that there should be all that much of a difference. In my department, although it is a communication department, we have students interested in journalism, in advertising, in P. R. , in new media, and so forth. The students learn the basics of mass communication, interpersonal communication, and intercultural communication, they learn about new media and communication technologies. They are then free to pursue their own interests within the program. We do not "track" them into a particular curriculum based on those interests, it is up to them to fulfill their interests, with our supervision.

**Gazetteer:** What kind of education and professional background do your faculty

have? Is a doctoral degree required?

**Jones:** Yes, all of our full time faculty must have the doctorate, or must be within a year of completing it. Some of them have a professional background as well, but it is not required that they do.

**Gazetteer:** What is the major difference of qualification between communication faculty and journalism faculty? The former is more theory oriented and the latter is more practice oriented?

**Jones:** That generally seems to be the case, but it is not always so, as there are always exceptions (I myself, for instance, worked as a journalist, but now have a Ph. D. and I have taught practice, theory and research courses) and so I would not want to generalize too greatly.

**Gazetteer:** UIC is centrally located in the heart of Chicago. How do you make use of the location of the university? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such a location?

**Jones:** The main advantages have to do with our students' abilities to avail themselves of world-class media, and to be able to participate in a global culture. This is an advantage for faculty too, of course. The diversity of the student body is perhaps the greatest advantage for all of us. Our students come from all over the world, representing numerous cultures and understandings, and do much learning from one another.

**Gazetteer:** You require that master students complete their degree within five years or be dismissed. Is the time limit a common practice?

**Jones:** It is a time limit for all of our graduate students, whether full or part time. It is common to have a time limit, and I have seen them range from 3 to 5 years for master's students, and from 5 to 7 years for doctoral students.

**Gazetteer:** You worked at the University of Tulsa, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and now at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Would you like to compare these three schools?

**Jones:** Comparisons are difficult. Tulsa is a small, private, liberal arts school, one focused much more on teaching than on research. UW-Eau Claire is a regional, public university that serves its part of the state very well. UIC is a world-class research institution.

## **Internet Communication: Anyone Can Report on Anything**

**Gazetteer:** Having you as an expert in Internet communication. The following ques-



tions will focus on that area. Do you offer Internet communication as a specialty or major or just a course for all majors?

**Jones:** It's a specialty, really, not a major. Our students can put together several Internet related courses for a "concentration" in that area.

**Gazetteer:** Some experts emphasize the multi-media feature of the Internet and regard Internet as a combination of all traditional media. They said all the traditional courses should be reconstructed around the Internet. Other experts emphasize the technical feature of the Internet and consider it as an extension of traditional media. They said we can offer a technology-oriented course involving the Internet to all majors. What's your opinion?

**Jones:** I think some experts said, at the time television was introduced, that all courses should be reconstructed around television. It doesn't make sense to change the entire curriculum. My own opinion is that the internet, at this time, is one medium among many, and that we should continue to teach our students about the variety of media that are available, that they may encounter both as professionals and as consumers.

**Gazetteer:** What to focus on in Internet communication education? On-line journalism professors in my school emphasize technology and skills at the undergraduate level but focus on theory at the graduate level. Any comment on their choice?

**Jones:** I prefer to mix it up. There is no reason that undergraduates could not get some theory and graduate students some practice. I'd prefer all students get some knowledge of all of the areas you mention.

**Gazetteer:** What is the most distinctive characteristics of on-line journalism? What kind of curriculum can reflect that?

**Jones:** I'm not sure I have a good answer to this. There is much to be said about what "journalism" means when it comes to the Internet. Is it reporting that comes to us via "traditional" media outlets, such as the web pages of existing print newspapers, for example? Or is blogging a form of journalism? Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic, to me, is that anyone can report on anything and post their report online. That is a form of journalism we have not seen since the advent of printing, which is what makes the Internet such an interesting and important new medium.

**Gazetteer:** In my school, most Internet communication majors end up working for traditional media because Internet companies are not demanding on-line journalists. Do you and your students have to face such a situation?

**Jones:** If they are good writers, they should be able to provide services to Internet companies, who need good writers and editors. It would probably help them to know some things about HTML and web page design, and perhaps other types of programming (such as Java, for example, or PHP) but that should not be entirely necessary. Much depends

on the individual student. If they are really interested in working for an internet company they should try to get a part time job with one, or an internship, and find out what they will need to learn for a full time job, then set out about finding out how and where to learn it. It may be that a journalism program is not the ideal place for them.

**Gazetteer:** What's your comment on the present situation of American Internet communication education?

**Jones:** We are in the early stages of Internet studies.