



Bryan ISD

High school Journalism Department moves into the Digital Age

by Shelley Seale



Superintendent
Tommy Wallis

On Oct. 5, 2012, the Bryan High School Vikings football team took the field against Conroe Oak Ridge — and for one player in particular it was a big moment. Senior Chris Johnson was playing one of his last games as a Viking and would soon trade in his uniform for the green and gold of Baylor University, which recruited him as a Bears quarterback.

The story was covered online in *The Norseman*, Bryan High School's digital newspaper, and also was posted on Twitter and the school's Facebook page, reaching thousands of football fans instantly. This is one example of the way Bryan High School has entered the digital age of journalism, making a historically print-based medium relevant and competitive while preparing students for the future — and the real-world job market.

"Our aim was to take a traditional print product and transfer it to have an online presence to mirror the newspaper in a traditional way, while also adding in social media avenues to stay relevant," says Rebecca Dominy, journalism advisor.

First, the Journalism Department at Bryan High created an online newspaper at <http://bryanhighnorseman.com>, which refreshes content each weekday. Dominy says that the online paper creates an environment where students, parents and community members are given new information on a daily basis.

"They know to look to us to stay updated on school info," she says.

But simply creating a digital newspaper wasn't enough. The Journalism Department needed to implement a plan for the school's entire online presence. This plan included:

- publishing news article through an RSS feed;
- automatically uploading new content to Twitter and Facebook;
- uploading photos of sports and events to Flickr;
- creating *The Norseman* iPhone app; and
- creating a YouTube video channel for the Journalism Department.

"Creating a presence in social media allows us to meet the students where they live and deliver information to them directly," Dominy adds. For example, the YouTube channel features commercials produced by the yearbook classes. One of these, a spoof on the Geico Insurance commercials, received more than 25,000 views.

"This project was a great experience for the students because it pushed them to be creative while help-

ing them learn how to appropriately communicate a message. It really encouraged the students and proved to them there was value in what they were creating," Dominy says.

Emily Nash, a junior and a co-editor at *The Norseman*, agrees that the digital journalism program has enhanced her learning and creativity.

"Writing feature articles helped me realize how diverse our school is and taught me how to communicate with all sorts of people," she says. "Not only did I learn how to write in a journalistic style, but being on the staff also taught me communication skills that will be useful in several different situations other than reporting. I also realized the importance of keeping up with social media and advancing through technology, such as using Twitter and Facebook, as well as making a website for our paper."

In fact, Nash's experience reinforces the popular idea that traditional classroom learning is changing. Bryan High School's move into the world of digital journalism is proof that schools can adjust successfully to the ever-changing nature of technology.

Learn as you go

The move to digital journalism wasn't without its challenges, however. One of the biggest obstacles in moving the newspaper online was meeting the demands of an expedited production schedule. Moving to a daily publication after having published one print newspaper every six weeks was a difficult task. Dominy cites Google Calendar as one helpful online sharing tool the journalism team has used to manage the publishing schedule.

Another challenge came when the team first created its social media presence and needed to build up that initial following. According to Dominy, to garner a social media audience, her department held drawings and gave away prizes to followers and fans on Twitter and Facebook.

"The entire program has allowed us to communicate with parents and community members on a much higher level than we were ever able to before," she says. "Students also have greater access by carrying around our product in their pockets on their smartphones."

Nash says that being a part of the digital journalism staff helps her feel more involved with school and up to date with what's going on across the campus.



Bryan High School junior Emily Nash and senior Emma Raleigh, co-editors of *The Norseman*, update and post articles to the digital newspaper's website, which refreshes every weekday.

"Aside from school involvement, participating at UIL events got me used to writing under pressure, which was beneficial in working with time-sensitive situations," she adds.

The BHS team won first place at the Midway Invitational UIL awards, in which students competed in the categories of news, feature writing, and editorial and headline writing.

"Joining *The Norseman* staff made me realize what kind of jobs you can get as a writer and the importance of creating a history through writing," Nash says.

John Fuller, a Bryan High School graduate, can attest to the value of a high-quality digital journalism program. Fuller, who graduated in May, was editor of *The Norseman* during his junior and senior years.

"Clearly, the journalism market is going through a significant change as more and more people consume their news online," says Fuller, who attends The University of Texas. "We wanted to not only learn how to write and publish for this new medium, but also to expand our paper to better serve our audience. ... This means moving to and continuing to expand our online presence."

Fuller explains that moving to digital news reporting allowed the newspaper staff to be more flexible with what and when they publish — as well as to connect more directly with their audience.

"Both of these things are incredibly appealing," he says. "Students and parents do have a desire to read the school paper and be informed on what's going on around campus. It became apparent that moving online would allow us to better connect with this audience."

Like Nash, Fuller says he felt more connected to his school because of his experience at *The Norseman*.

"By working on the school paper, you become much more entrenched in your school. You not only know about what's going on, but you feel a personal con-

Resources and links

The Norseman: <http://bryanhighnorseman.com>

Twitter page: <http://twitter.com/bhsnorseman>

Facebook page: www.facebook.com/BryanISDBryanHighNorseman

Flickr page: www.flickr.com/photos/bhsnorseman

RSS feed: <http://bryanhighnorseman.com/feed>

iOS app: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/norseman/id438980112?mt=8>

Youtube channel: <http://youtube.com/rmdominy>

nection to your school. I think working on this project made me a better student because I truly wanted my school to be represented well."

Bryan ISD Superintendent Tommy Wallis says that the high school's online initiatives have allowed Bryan High to attract a wider audience than ever before.

"Staying true to solid journalistic principles and instruction, Mrs. Dominy and her students have found ways to keep the journalism program interesting and relevant to the student body. This program is a great representation of transformational thinking and learning."

Dominy strives to run *The Norseman* at the same level of a professional newsstand publication, albeit on a smaller scale.

Says Dominy: "The changes that have been made in this course are vital to the existence of journalism. As journalism continues to change and evolve, schools have to adapt their programs to prepare their students for those changes. And as students turn to the Internet and social media for their news, we must place ourselves at the forefront of that movement to stay relevant. In an age of fast-paced information, high school journalism must find a way to serve our audience."

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