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Tuesday, April 12, 2005

Poynter, Knight Launch Online Training Portal

By [Joe Grimm](#)

An interview with Howard Finberg about the new training available through News University's e-learning courses. [Full story >>](#)



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Poynter, Knight Launch Online Training Portal

An interview with Poynter's Howard Finberg about the training available through News University's e-learning courses.

By [Joe Grimm](#) ([more by author](#))

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In 2002, after Howard Finberg joined The Poynter Institute as its Presidential Scholar to examine the impact of new technology on journalism, he looked at what technological advances could mean for Poynter's mission. That year, Finberg wrote a report in which he determined that online training would be one way to deal with the hunger in the industry for professional development.

The findings were sent to the [John S. and James L. Knight Foundation](#). The foundation was interested in this possible new platform for training, so Poynter submitted a successful proposal for a grant. The result is [News University](#) (NewsU), a partnership between Knight and Poynter.

NewsU's first e-learning course was done as an experiment in 2002, using a group of Poynter summer fellows as guinea pigs. In 2003, Finberg turned one of faculty member Chip Scanlan's lessons on how to conduct a good interview into an interactive course. During that same time, a training module with the Online News Association was launched. NewsU was on its way.

Today, as NewsU is formally launched, the online school has more than 2,000 registered users from around the world. Journalists from India, Portugal, Australia, The Philippines, Canada, Uzbekistan, Albania and China have joined U.S. journalists who have participated in NewsU's courses.

I recently interviewed Finberg, now Poynter's interactive learning director, by e-mail to learn more.

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Joe Grimm: NewsU seems to be kind of ... fun. And there seems to be some method to the mirth. What role does fun play in online learning at NewsU?

Howard Finberg: Yes, the humor is deliberate and it's based on two things. First, we know that most training is hard work, so humor is a way to make the effort a little more enjoyable. We also know that humor is a way to engage a participant. The more engaged they are, the more likely the learning will stick.



Howard
Finberg

I like the flexibility and the compactness of the learning modules at NewsU. It seems that journalists could gobble them up faster than Poynter can design courses. What is your timetable for launching new training?

The fear of not having enough courses is the reason we waited as long as we have to "officially launch." NewsU has been up and running for more than a year. However, we decided to build out the course catalog before telling folks what we do. However, with 2,000 registered users, we aren't a big secret any more.

I'm sure that there will be some folks who will go through all our offerings quickly. That's great. We'll create more. That's why we are working with so many groups outside Poynter to create e-learning. NewsU can only succeed if it goes beyond the Poynter faculty.

What courses will we see?

Well, here's the list of what we have launched:

- [The Interview](#); sharpening your interviewing skills.
- [Language of the Image](#); understanding the elements of photojournalism.
- [ONA Training Project Module](#); learning from the best online projects [with [ONA](#)].
- [The Lead Lab](#); writing better leads.
- [Cleaning Your Copy](#); the importance of style, grammar, and spelling.
- [Beat Basics & Beyond](#); how to create and manage a beat.

Here's what's planned for our April launch:

- [Journalism & Trauma](#); how to deal with covering traumatic events.
- [Freedom of Information](#); understanding and using [FOI](#) [with [SPJ](#)].
- [Math for Journalists](#); avoiding problems with numbers.
- [Better Listening](#); how to spot and avoid lousy listening.
- [Covering Water Quality](#); background and story coverage

ideas [with [SEJ](#)].

- [Writer's Workbench](#); a collection of tips and techniques for better writing.
- [Community Service Photojournalism](#); learning from [ASNE's](#) contest winners.

There are some other courses that are in development right now but we don't have all the pieces in place. It's busy around here.

It seems that most everything is free right now. We know better than that! Some of us are still paying off student loans. How long can you keep up free offerings, and what do you expect the real prices to be like?

We can keep up the free offerings as long as the Knight Foundation and Poynter pay the bills. But we don't think all courses will be or should be free. Many of them. But not all of them.

We want journalists to see that there's value in these kinds of training modules and either pay a very MODEST fee themselves or get their editor to pay the \$9.95, \$19.95, \$49.95, or \$179.50, depending on the course. Frankly, I don't know what the courses will cost. What I do know is that we want to keep the cost low enough that a journalist working for a 35,000-circulation daily won't think twice about signing up. Or having the editor okay a \$150 module that helps a copy editor write better headlines or a writer do better stories because there's someone on the other end of the computer that will give feedback and guidance. That's something that many editors don't have time for.

I think I can get my editor to pay for that -- especially as there will be no travel, hotel or meals (and no expense forms for me) -- but will editors respect online learning the way they respect get-on-the-airline learning?

If their journalists do a better job, absolutely. If they can see the results, absolutely. However, as much as I want to reach those editors, NewsU's key audience are the thousands of individual journalists who are so very hungry for training.

So, could NewsU help beef up a résumé?

Maybe sometime in the distant future we'll be able to provide something that would be good for the résumé. For right now, we're all about the training, not the résumé.

I've been to Poynter in the past and my favorite part was interacting with smart people from across the country. Do we lose that online?

The interaction is different at NewsU. NewsU is not about replacing seminar-based training. Online learning is very different and so how you interact with the course content is different. And how you interact with your fellow students, if you do interact, will

vary by course. Sometimes you interact with the course material. And that increases the chance that the learning will be retained.

We also will have e-learning courses that are faculty-led. Those folks will provide a more familiar form of interaction. But, hey, this isn't a Poynter seminar. Not supposed to be. It's like reading. We read lots of different kinds of writing -- from novels to newspapers to comic books. Different forms and different experiences. Each unique and valuable.

What do you expect the reach to be like with NewsU?

We're already at 2,000 registered users. And that's without any advertising or mailings. I'm sure we'll double that number in a year. And then perhaps we'll double again in a couple of years.

Is there a dress code at NewsU?

Anything you want. Clothing is optional. We won't be doing any class pictures.

Forgive me, but I have a technical question. The [FAQs](#) on your site say that no special setup is required beyond a high-speed or broadband connection. Does it matter whether I am on a Mac or PC? And what about things like my company's firewall and installing Flash?

Even a high-speed connection is not required, although accessing some of the interactivity via modem is slow. We don't care whether it's a Mac or PC. The browser type matters and we tell you that on the site. You shouldn't have any problems with your company's firewall, as we are just another Internet site. Flash, however, is important. But the last numbers I saw indicated that most computers have Flash and most companies will install the plug-in.

One last question: NewsU has a citrus-y color scheme. Sort of a tangerine and mango thing. Are there plans for a NewsU basketball team? I'd like to see those colors in the NCAA basketball tournament.

No plans for a basketball team, since I'm unqualified -- no jump shot. So discussions are under way for a NewsU lawn bowling team. Sort of fits, doesn't it: News Ewe.

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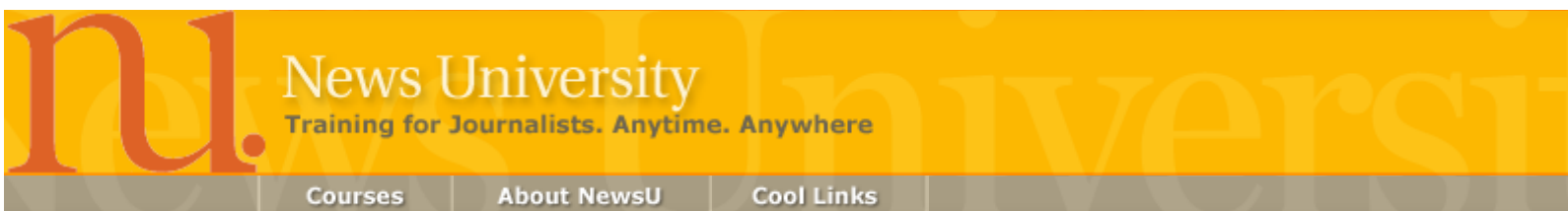
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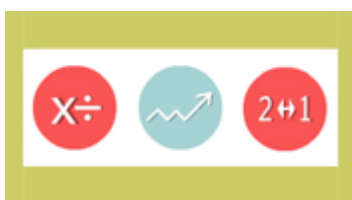


Welcome

It's Official! NewsU Launches with Added Courses

After much planning, testing and developing, NewsU has officially opened its doors to journalists, journalism educators and students. We offer innovative online training through self-directed modules, eSeminars and faculty-led courses that target all types of media and all levels of experience. Writing and reporting techniques. Insights into visual journalism. Courses on ethics and values. Skills for newsroom leaders. We've got it all. Our official announcement is [here](#).

Check Out Our Latest Courses



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From percents to ratios and everything in between: What you need to master math.

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Howard**

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About NewsU

NewsU is a project of [The Poynter Institute](#) and the [Knight Foundation](#) to offer tightly focused courses that appeal to print, broadcast and online journalists. Log in for 10 minutes or two hours - NewsU is always available. [Register now](#) to enroll in a course.

A project of The Poynter Institute funded by the Knight Foundation

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