

Project Journalism! How Project Management Knowledge Can Help Journalists & Traditional News Media!

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Introduction

We are practicing "Project Journalism" daily, writing stories and reporting about projects and project management around the world. While most of my career has been related to various aspects of project management, now I am more of a journalist than anything. Some of our correspondents around the world are also following this path, one of researching and writing about projects, programs, portfolios of projects, project and program management and other aspects of this exciting field.

As most readers of this article already know, most industries, economies and societies around the world are becoming more project-oriented. As the rate of change in so many aspects of our lives continues to increase, projects to create or respond to changes are everywhere. Every organization, every community, every family has one or more important projects underway or planned. Projects are everywhere, and of increasing importance.

The Project Management Institute (PMI®) has estimated that project work now represents around 25% of global economic output, trillions of dollars of annual investment, with millions of people involved and affected. Over the last two years, as governments around the world have reacted to the global economic downturn with stimulus spending programs, we have seen massive investments in various infrastructure and social programs (and projects) everywhere. In nearly every country, there are many important projects underway. In every organization, there are "mission critical" programs and projects related to new facilities, new products, new markets, organizational changes and other transformations.

In addition, as globalization has continued and we become both more aware of global issues affecting the planet, and more engaged in or interested in global initiatives (economic development, disease prevention and healthcare, food production and famine prevention, sustainable energy, environmental stewardship), more global projects and programs have gained visibility and importance. Good examples of this are in the fields of climatology, weather prediction, preparedness for extreme weather and natural disasters, and emergency response.

In another recent editorial, on the subject of "Project Stories", I described various types of stories that exist on most projects, and on all projects that are very big or important. Those stories can be associated with the milestones over the life of a project, as well as with the people and teams of project participants (both individuals and organizations) involved. I provided some examples of very interesting projects and potential project stories, in exotic and mundane locations, in old and brand new industries, that are affecting many people.

So if there are so many projects and so many project stories around, why aren't there more projects in the newspapers and other traditional media?

The Problem – Lack of Project Management Knowledge and Education in Liberal Arts Programs, and in Journalism Departments in Particular

As we have seen in various organizations that implement project management, nothing can happen until someone learns about it. The problem here, in my opinion, is that most journalists and writers in general learn nothing about projects or project management over the course of his or her education. Journalism majors take courses about writing and other aspects of traditional media. In some universities, journalism departments are now disappearing altogether or are being converted to electronic media and technology departments.

I have never heard of a project management course offered to journalism majors in school. If projects are so important to so many communities and economies, and if projects are so full of interesting stories, why not teach something about projects to journalism students? Why not teach more students about the life cycle of projects, about the various decisions that go into creating, financing and approving projects, and about the various issues that can arise when doing something for the first time (as most projects are)?

What about project risks? Shouldn't more citizens know about some of the big risks associated with the projects being hatched or launched in their cities and neighborhoods? Shouldn't more citizens be better equipped to question project costs and outcomes, when their lives are affected? More information and knowledge about public projects, for example, are often only provided by the media. It is up to the journalists in these communities to inform the public, raise questions and tell the project stories. But what if the journalists don't know the right questions to ask in the first place, or where to look for the important stories?

A Proposed Solution

I propose a simple solution to this situation – 'Project Journalism'. Why not a course or even a field of study for project journalism at the university level?

To begin, I would offer a lecture to a journalism class about projects and project management. That lecture would cover some of the basics that we all learn when we first get into this field, such topics as:

- What are projects, programs and portfolios?
- What is a project life cycle, and what are key milestones or decision points?
- What is project management?
- What is project cost, time and quality management?
- What risks are prevalent in various types of projects?
- What people related issues often arise on project teams?
- Who are project stakeholders, and what are their relationships to projects?

There are many other aspects of projects and project management that might be covered in such a lecture. The purpose would be to introduce the topic as a source of stories and news that could help these students write about projects later, when they begin their careers as journalists.

Better yet, an entire Project Journalism course. As we all know, there is much more to project management than can be covered in a one-hour lecture. Many of us take week-long training courses just to study some specific aspect of PM. There are now entire undergraduate and graduate degree programs in project management at many colleges and universities around the world, even a few PhD programs. So why not have at least one course on Project Journalism that a student majoring in Journalism could take for a semester, a course that provides basic information about projects and project management, in a manner and from a perspective that can help students think about the growing numbers and types of projects in society.

Eventually, I see an entire field of Project Journalism emerging. Many large public projects entail huge budgets, time frames of several years, multiple public and private organizations, and hundreds of project stakeholders (employees, decision makers, suppliers, citizens, politicians, etc.). Traditional media (newspapers, television, online publications) will follow these projects, which will have dozens of stories over their lives. Journalists will be assigned to report about those projects; those journalists who know something about projects and project management will be far better prepared to ask the right questions, focus on the important issues, and better inform (or entertain) their readers. This is only logical.

A project management lecture could be provided to journalism students, or practicing journalists, by any experienced project manager or project management expert. I plan to approach several local universities with this offer, and suggest that others approach journalism professors or department heads with this same offer. If you are a journalism student or professor and would like such a lecture, please let me know. Either I will be happy to help, or provide an expert resource that might be more available to your location.

Meanwhile – An Offer

If you are a Journalism Professor, here is another proposal:

Assign your students a class project – to research and write about an important local project. It can be any type of project, or program; the story should describe the project, explain why it is important to local citizens or the community, and include some surprising news or facts. You select the best news stories. We will publish the top five – either as breaking news or in the **PM World Journal**. Your students get published, perhaps for the first time; you, your class and your university gain some global visibility.

To help get started, I invite you (and your students) to read my September 2010 Editorial on Project Stories.

Just think, if we had journalism students in our various local, national and international capitals researching and writing articles and stories about the projects being approved and financed in those places, many with taxpayer money, wouldn't their stories be interesting! Think of the fascinating stories associated with most NASA projects, or those funded by the UN, World Bank and many NGOs.

Some traditional news media are already making the transition. For example, I have noticed many more interesting project stories on CNN and several other cable channels in recent months. I expect this trend to accelerate.

PM World is already practicing Project Journalism. We are also looking for more project stories and project news. If you want to try your hand at project journalism, please contact me. We can publish your stories.

About the Author



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David L. Pells is Managing Editor of the ***PM World Journal***, a global eJournal for program and project management, and Executive Director of the PM World Library. David is an internationally recognized leader in the field of professional project management with more than 35 years of experience on a variety of programs and projects, including energy, engineering, construction, defense, transit, high technology and nuclear security, and project sizes ranging from several thousand to ten billion dollars. He has been an active professional leader in the United States since the 1980s, serving on the board of directors of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) twice. He was founder and chair of the Global Project Management Forum (1995-2000), an annual meeting of leaders of PM associations from around the world. David was awarded PMI's Person of the Year award in 1998 and Fellow Award, PMI's highest honor, in 1999. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM) in the UK; Project Management Associates (PMA - India); and Russian Project Management Association SOVNET. From June 2006 until March 2012, he was the managing editor of the globally acclaimed *PM World Today* eJournal. He occasionally provides high level advisory support for major programs and global organizations. David has published widely, spoken at conferences and events worldwide, and can be contacted at editor@pmworldjournal.net.

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