**RJI sends Potter Digital Ambassadors to enhance digital efforts at community newsrooms all over Missouri**

By Austin Fitzgerald

COLUMBIA, Mo. (Feb. 15, 2024) – Over the course of one week in early January, the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute once again sent students to community newsrooms all over Missouri as part of the Potter Digital Ambassadors Program.

Nine students from the Missouri School of Journalism participated in the sixth year of the program, in which they spent their winter break helping newsrooms establish or improve digital efforts by introducing new digital tools, training staff and developing guides for continued success — particularly around the topic of search engine optimization.

“Addressing the digital divide between rural and urban newspapers is key to ensuring that local news is relevant and accessible,” said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. “That’s why it’s so important that journalism students not only learn how to do great community reporting, but that they actively take part in bridging that gap. This program perfectly unites those educational and public service missions.”

Elizabeth Stephens, an associate professor and co-coordinator of the program, said this year’s effort featured a greater portion of newsrooms that had never worked with a Potter Ambassador before. This offered students the opportunity to develop solutions catered to a wide variety of individual needs, whether a newsroom was building a digital foundation or “leveling up” its capabilities to better engage audiences.

“At this point, many newspapers are comfortable with their social media and managing their websites,” Stephens said. “This time we really emphasized that the ambassadors could expand their digital work and help them improve in the areas they needed with a specific emphasis on analytics and improving SEO.”

The students also had help on the SEO front. This year, they brought SEO training from [Align Simple](https://alignsimple.com/) into the newsrooms, helping staff and management understand how to boost traffic to their digital products. Building on last year’s emphasis on helping outlets get comfortable with [Google Analytics 4](https://developers.google.com/analytics/devguides/collection/ga4), the students ensured that their newsrooms were able to get the most out of the data available to them.

The results were clear.

“What was the most useful help was Aysia [Grey] showing us our own statistics and explaining what they mean,” wrote Skye Pournazari, editor of the Maryville Forum, in an email. “The new dashboard she provided us makes understanding the analytics so much more simple.”

Indeed, the ambassadors themselves were often singled out for praise.

“I was most impressed with Emily Eller’s knowledge of all things analytics,” wrote Kyle Troutman, the owner, publisher and editor of the Cassville Democrat. “She had an answer and explanation for every one of my questions, and I greatly appreciated that!”

Of course, the newsrooms weren’t the only ones to take valuable insights from the experience.

Shannon Worley, a senior who is no stranger to innovation — having previously participated in a research project designed to [revolutionize broadcast television](https://journalism.missouri.edu/2023/11/missouri-school-of-journalism-leads-industry-toward-newest-tv-broadcast-standard-atsc-3-0-as-part-of-next-gen-tv-fellowship/) — designed social media, email marketing and video strategies to help Leader Publications hold a successful donation drive in their eastern Missouri community of Festus. The work required her to spend time in the town speaking with readers, and she said the program left her with an intimate understanding of how local news functions in a small town.

“It was the perfect project to work on to truly understand the special bond that a community newspaper has with its town,” Worley said. “I truly have not experienced a newsroom atmosphere that is so filled with passion for their work and the community they serve.”

That sentiment was not unique to Worley. Colin Rhoads, BJ ’23, went to the Lake Sun Leader at Lake of the Ozarks just after earning his bachelor’s degree in December. In addition to helping the publication identify how users were getting around its paywall, he analyzed business models and worked with the newsroom on audience and product strategy. But for Rhoads, who is currently an adjunct instructor in the School of Journalism, it was the small-town news environment that left the strongest impression on him.

“I met some cool people and got in touch with a small news community that I otherwise would not have known about,” Rhoads said. “It showed me the value that smaller communities put on their news, such as local politics or high school sports.”

It’s no coincidence that becoming a Potter Digital Ambassador proved to be an eye-opening experience for students. While helping community newsrooms strengthen and expand their digital presence is central to the program, the experience is also meant to expose students to the sheer variety of options available to them as they build toward their careers.

“This experience lets students see what kind of paths are possible beyond reporting,” Stephens said. “Many are on the cross platform editing and producing or social and audience strategy paths, and this experience allows them to put their skills to work and see what kind of role would be a good fit for them in the future.”

## About Walter B. Potter, Jr.

In 2010, the program’s namesake, Walt Potter, MA ’81, [established](https://journalism.missouri.edu/2015/04/mu-receives-1-million-gift-to-support-journalism-education-on-lgbt-issues/) the Missouri School of Journalism’s Walter B. Potter Fund for Innovation in Local Journalism. The endowment supports teaching and research centered on journalism that serves small communities, such as towns in rural areas or individual neighborhoods in larger urban areas. Potter said his gift was in honor of his late father, Walter Sr., and was motivated by his career as a journalist as well as his positive experiences as a graduate student at the Missouri School of Journalism.