

Rob Roberts, director of digital strategies Department of Energy

Michael O'Connell, Producer, It's All Journalism

Welcome to It's All Journalism. My name is Michael O'Connell. Today I'm here with Rob Roberts. He is a, well actually, I met him first at American University. He was my professor in video journalism, right?

Rob Roberts, director of digital strategies, Department of Energy

Correct.

Michael O'Connell

That was the class. He has experience, lots of experience in lots of different areas of journalism. He's currently at the Department of Energy running their digital strategy team. Is that what it is?

Rob Roberts

Correct. Yes.

Michael O'Connell

And before that he had a high-profile job at a government agency conveniently located to his office on Pennsylvania Avenue. Before that, he was at *USA Today* and —

Rob Roberts

The *Raleigh News & Observer* and some places before that as well.

Michael O'Connell

So, he's been all over. He's an educator. He's somebody who knows quite a lot about different parts of journalism, which is why we're here talking about this. So, welcome. Tell me about your current job at Department of Energy.

Rob Roberts

I came into the Department of Energy maybe about six months ago. They've recently upgraded their website over the last year or so to a Drupal platform and really before they had a very staid, ordinary government site. It wasn't even called Energy.gov. It was called DoE.gov, so you had to know what the acronym was and everything like that. So, it was a landmark change to say, "Let's call it instead of DoE.gov."

I came in there because I had experience working in Drupal and Drupal content management systems, and so they asked me to kind of lead that operation. Our director, who I knew from a previous job, ended up only staying another six to eight weeks before she got a job offer in New York and they asked if I would take over the operation, and so, I'm their director of digital strategies right now.

Michael O'Connell

What is it you're trying to accomplish there?

Rob Roberts

You know, it's interesting because, coming from a journalism environment, we basically run our operation like a news operation, obviously, with a certain slant and a certain bent. But we have probably about 10 people in the office. We have writers who are basically beat writers and content managers. We have one that covers green energy and renewable energy issues. We have one that covers science that comes out of the labs, like Argon and some of these high-profile labs that run under the Department of Energy. Then we have another who covers energy efficiency. And, so they cover their assignments like a beat, working with all the different offices and programs inside. We have video people. We have someone who does maps and data, and we have a social media coordinator. So, it's set up very much like a newsroom and we run it like a newsroom. We cover events. We have initiatives. We have packages we put out and, you know, a lot of what I learned in a newsroom we're applying to how we want to run our operation there.

Michael O'Connell

Are there any particular challenges for you working for a federal agency as opposed to say a newsroom?

Rob Roberts

I think the biggest challenge that we deal with so far and that we're really working on and improving is speed. Coming from someone who covered and sports and things like that and who covered politics, you had to have something up on the Web as things were happening. In the government environment, there's approval processes and messaging and things like that and it has to be run through many different people. And by the time you get through the approval process, often, you're a day or two out for the event, which is a lifetime in the Internet Age. So, streamlining processes, staying on message, but being timely and relevant, I think is a big challenge that we deal with.

Michael O'Connell

So, how do you bring your journalistic skills then to that world?

Rob Roberts

I think a lot of it is sort of the mentality, and the mentality especially of online news, where things have to happen quickly. Things have to be timely and relevant. It's spreading the word that if we don't have something up immediately after or during or we're not live-tweeting an event or something like that, someone else is going to do it. You find that the person who often does it first is the person that kind of frames the argument and the issue. I think there is a place, obviously, we want journalists to cover what we're doing and I want them to cover it from their objective slant. I think there's always going to be great value in that. But I think we provide a perspective and we provide a, there is

an overall message that we're trying to get out, implementing the president's agenda and I think it's important to have our voice in there too saying, "Here's what we're trying to accomplish," and having that direct conduit to the people.

Michael O'Connell

Getting that out there quickly is probably really useful to you to get that message out.

Rob Roberts

Right

Michael O'Connell

And as you sort of said, frame the conversation. So, who do you see as your audience? Is it just the general public?

Rob Roberts

The general public, we find that as we look at our metrics and the people who come to Energy.gov, we find that it is a very general audience. We find too that people are particularly interested in what we do from a consumer's perspective. People are interested in energy efficiency. They're interested in things like tax rebates that may be available for them if they put solar panels on their roof or install a new water heater or something like that. So, we have a lot of general public audience who's primarily interested in energy efficiency and those issues.

Then we obviously have specialty audiences, people who are interested in renewables. And then there's an industry audience that's interested in oil policy or natural gas policy or things like that. So, we're catering to a lot of different audiences. On our flagship site, which is Energy.gov, which I'm in charge of, we try to focus on, default on that general, consumer level audience.

Michael O'Connell

Have you had a chance to look at other government websites and sort of see what they're doing?

Rob Roberts

Yeah, it's interesting now because in the government space, I see a lot of what excited me about journalism 10 years ago, where, when I was at Raleigh, we were always watching what *The Post* was doing and what *The New York Times* was doing and saying, "How can we do it? That's cool. How can we do that? How can we surprise them with something that we've done?"

o, I think a lot of, you know, especially among the agencies that are starting to understand the Internet and starting to understand what they want to be doing as part of a digital strategy, we see that same level of competition where we're looking at what State's doing or we're looking at, especially what the White House is doing, and using

that as kind of a way sort of upping our game and kind of keeping tabs on what everybody else is doing.

Michael O'Connell

In my day job at [Federal News Radio](#), I deal with a lot of federal agencies and deal with a lot of the PIOs and the websites and the things that they're doing. And I know that some of the conversation that's out there is the role that social media plays in what you're doing. And some agencies appear to embrace it really well, while others seem to be trying to figure out what their strategy is. What do you do, as far as social media goes?

Rob Roberts

It is a challenge. We're trying to, in some ways, kind of loosen up our image on social media. I think you see that and that's a struggle. I think you probably see it a lot with there are plenty of government agencies that basically tweet out press releases.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Rob Roberts

And it's a link that goes to a press release or a blog post that's written like a press release. There's maybe some value in that in keeping people informed about what officially is going on.

But, you know, I think there's value too in trying to be part of the conversation. And there's a big conversation going on about all sorts of topics and with us, there's a lot of conversation about renewable energy and natural gas policy and things like that. And it's trying to be part of that conversation in a way that's less formal, like social media is. A lot of people are hesitant to do that and are kind of scared to do it. I think we see dividends when we kind of go a little more informal.

When I got there, someone would ask us a question. They would direct the question @energy at Twitter.

Michael O'Connell

Mr. Energy, sir.

Rob Roberts

Yeah. They would ask us a question and, you know, in our office and in other offices, they're like, "Can we answer their question?" That's the big debate about whether we could answer that question. And I was like, "Of course we should answer the question, they've asked it to us." So, you don't want to take it too far.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Rob Roberts

You don't want to be, you know, going crazy with memes and things like that. That's probably not the place or what the people expect from their government agency. But I think people want to know you have a personality. I think they really want to know that you care about these issues and it's we want people in our office who are passionate about the subject, who go home and read about renewables, who go home and are interested in hard-core science and particle accelerators and things like that. And I think it's important that we convey that we're interested in these topics.

Michael O'Connell

I know that one of the challenges I sort of had with my job at Federal News Radio is when I tell people that I write about the government, they're thinking, "Oh, you're writing about the elections. You're writing about the politics." But in actuality what we do is we cover the government, the agencies, the information they've got and the people who actually work there. And it's a different type of reporting.

And one of the things that I've noticed is there's a hell of a lot of information there. And a lot of it has nothing to do with politics. It has to do with, "Here are reports. Here are photos. Here are things that we need to get out to people." And I think the challenge for a lot of the websites and a lot of the agencies is making that stuff available in way that people can digest it and use it.

Rob Roberts

Yeah. We put out tons of information. I mean, there's tons of reports, there's tons of documents, there's tons of press releases. It is in many ways running Energy.gov is very similar to running a newspaper, where you have style sections and you have life sections and you have sports sections and things like that. And there's this onslaught of information. How do you categorize that information? How do you focus on what's relevant and how do you drive an audience that's looking for a specific topic to their topics quickly and easily.

Michael O'Connell

One of the agencies that I think a lot of people cite is NASA. I thought they do a really good job, especially in social media. But, that's an example of an agency that people have a generally good impression of and that they want to get some of that information. They want to see the latest photos from Mars. They want to see the latest —

Rob Roberts

Well, we always complain because they trump us. We're very excited about Google Hangouts now.

Michael O'Connell

Oh, let's talk about that.

Rob Roberts

Everybody's like, Google+ is still this sort of like frontier that nobody ... one of my colleagues at work says, "Google+ is like opening the closet door and finding like four friends clutching each other in the darkness."

But, you know, the Google Hangout has really revolutionizing, has the potential, I would say, to revolutionize the way that we're interacting with an audience. But NASA just trumps us every time. We did a Google+ one day. I forget the topic. I think it was about women in science. And it was well received and we had a good conversation and things like that. The next day NASA does the Google Hangout from space. We're like, "Oh, yeah. They just take everything that we do and do it from space."

Michael O'Connell

There you go.

Rob Roberts

They tweet from space. They Google Hangout from space. They Reddit from space.

Michael O'Connell

The rover that's up on Mars has a Twitter account and tweets.

Rob Roberts

Yes.

Michael O'Connell

With some help from JPL I believe.

Rob Roberts

It's power unit is supplied by the Department of Energy.

Michael O'Connell

There you go. And that's the type of information you need to push out there.

Rob Roberts

Yeah. Exactly

Michael O'Connell

To build yourselves up. What is that old commercial, the Hertz commercial or Avis?
"We're number two but we try harder."

Rob Roberts

Exactly. DoE, the Department of Energy is never, you know, we're not going to be NASA and we're not going to be the State Department or Justice or one of these super, highly visible agencies. But, we do a lot of cool stuff and with that sort of like lower, I wouldn't call us lower tier, but that lower profile.

Michael O'Connell

You're a big agency.

Rob Roberts

We're a big agency, but with that sort of lower profile, I think we get a little freedom that way. I think we're widely recognized as an agency that's starting to do better and starting to do well. Energy.gov, when it was launched, was a light year's improvement from what we had before and we won a bunch of awards for it and even beat out the White House for having like the best government site and things like that. And so, we're really trying to foster this idea that we are a very progressive sort of agency that's kind of trying to like push the envelope of what the government can do online. Which is a low bar, sometimes.

Michael O'Connell

Which is a low bar, well, yeah. There are quite a lot of agencies that seem to be struggling and some seem to be really taking to it. I know that when President Obama came into office one of the things he was pushing was more open government, more transparency, greater access to data.

Rob Roberts

And I think you saw that with The White House, all the visitor records go online, all the salaries go online. I think you've seen some interesting things with that. I know there was one point somebody was trying to like reverse engineer who Bob Woodward had gone to see with one of the books to figure out who the sources were based on The White House visitor records.

You know, but I think the open government thing is starting to bear fruit now, I mean, we're on the cusp of a big revolution in government, where Data.gov was kind of the beginning of it, where the government put all these open datasets and stuff like that. It never really materialized in the way they hoped it would, so they're moving on to like a new strategy involved with it. I think more and more details of how that works is coming out.

I think we're starting to see this sort of sea change in government where they've always said, "We're going to err on the side of making things public and accessible." But I think really now that's starting to take hold and it's coming out of the open source movement. It's coming out of seeing what journalists have been able to do with open data. So, we're trying and throughout the government they're trying to take this policy that everything should be open, accessible, machine readable — we should focus on APIs and

open datasets and things like that. I think we're going to see a real advance in how government information is put out.

They talk about government being this almost being like an API unto itself, where everything is just pushed out and it's open and it's accessible and journalists and hackers and app developers and things like that all have access to this open data and can start doing more and more things.

Michael O'Connell

I know that one of the open data examples that people cite is with Hurricane Sandy, what happened in New York. I think it was WNYC had used some of the data that they had gotten so that they were actually able to document a lot of information on a map, lay it across a map, so that their readers could use it to find out where there were facilities and where there were problems and things that they should avoid. That's kind of an example of if you make this information available in a way that journalists can use it, they can actually maybe take it to different level.

Rob Roberts

Right. We saw lots of people. Google put out crisis map that was based on a lot of government data and there was the WNYC map. We even partnered with this group of high school kids who were helping report on gas availability in their neighborhood. So, it comes from the most unlikely places sometimes. But, if you make this available and give it to people in a format they can use it, things happen that you never intended to happen.

Michael O'Connell

Right. Because they start making the connections and they're viewing it from a journalist's eyes that, "How can I put this in a way that my readers, my users can take it and make it something."

Rob Roberts

Right. As someone who was a multimedia journalist, it affects my thinking in how we deal with stuff, and I know a number of people throughout the government who came from this background mainly because we ran out of jobs in journalism at one point. But, we come in and it's like we're endowed with these ideas of transparency and openness. We know what the potential is when we have data and access to information. We try to, at least I try to continue that in our work in the government. Can this be open? Should this be open? Is a pdf file with all these obscure charts and graphs that were made in Microsoft Excel the best way to present the information or should we just put it out as a dataset and let people know that it's out there?

Michael O'Connell

Well, it's the people's information.

Rob Roberts

Yeah.

Michael O'Connell

They paid for it.

Rob Roberts

Exactly.

Michael O'Connell

For the gathering of it. it would be nice if they could get it back in a way that they could actually use it and, I think, using journalists as partners and less as adversary, being able to provide them with information that they can use and take to a different level, I think is hugely important.

Before we started the recording, we talked a little bit about your experience as an educator and sort of how your perspective has changed about who your students are. I think it ties in with what we're talking about now.

Rob Roberts

I started as an adjunct instructor at American [University], where I met you guys, when I was a senior video editor at *USA Today*. I've bounced all over the place, obviously. But, I think, a couple of things have changed since I started teaching there. One is I realized, much like my career, I've seen it with my students that what we have to accept is — I hope they don't mind me saying this — but we have to accept as journalism educators that a good number of our students are not going to work in journalism at all and the majority of our students are probably not going to be working journalists within five years of graduating. I think we see that with our own numbers. American places students very well. We, obviously, have a lot of connections and a lot of opportunities here in D.C., but you know, when I look back at my classes, probably less than half of them, especially at the undergrad level, go into what we would call journalism jobs.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Rob Roberts

And then, as they go further and further on, they do what most people do. The low pay and the long hours and the lack of job security these days tends to drive them out and they end up at associations. They end up at non profits. They end up at government agencies. And they end up places where they're doing jobs that, in a lot of ways, are very much like journalism, but with a perspective, with an agenda, with a message that they have to put out. But honestly, at some levels, especially with the data level, we're seeing the non profits doing great work, like Sunlight [Foundation] and like that that are pushing the envelope. Also, non profits are killing it in terms of online video. AARP does like tons of online video and many others. It's all like very highly produced DSLR type

stuff. It's stuff that in a lot of ways newspapers and TV stations just don't have the time to do with the demands that they're under these days.

Michael O'Connell

I think what's happened with journalism and I'm not really surprised with what you're saying about where your students are is that a pure journalist job, I don't even know if that exists anymore.

Rob Roberts

Yeah.

Michael O'Connell

Or if it exists, it's a very, it's the white tiger of the jungle. There are very few of them left. That we are so many jack-of-all-trades at this point. We do all types of things. There are people who work in newspapers who are doing things that you could say, "Well, maybe that's not so much journalism, maybe that's more PR or something like that."

Rob Roberts

Yeah.

Michael O'Connell

The industry's changing so, I think people are taking these skills and doing something different with them.

One of the other things you mentioned that you thought it would be fun to talk about is when you were at Raleigh, you were heavily involved with sports.

Rob Roberts

Yeah. I always tell my students that if you really want to understand where journalism fits in like the online world that doing the time doing sports journalism is a great way to do it. The people are so fanatic about their followings.

Michael O'Connell

Passionate.

Rob Roberts

And there's never enough information.

Michael O'Connell

No.

Rob Roberts

They have allegiance to some sites, but they're always on the lookout for something new, something different, a different perspective and they interact. In some ways, you

know, you get that in politics too, although politics tends to be very polarized sort of reaction.

And sports is that too, but in sports everyone is sort of an armchair analyst and they have an opinion and things like that. But, when I was in Raleigh, we had the luxury of there's only one professional team. There's the Carolina Hurricanes, which is a hockey team. But, college sports is everything down there and especially basketball. So we have N.C. State in Raleigh. We have Duke in Durham and we have North Carolina Tarheels in Chapel Hill, where I went to grad school. So, I'm a little partial to UNC, but I actually have a soft spot for all the programs now.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Rob Roberts

But, you know, the interesting thing about it is that each program in terms of their fan-base has sort of a different sort of mentality, a different feel.

Duke, very few people who went to Duke end up staying in North Carolina. They are people who come from other places, they go to Duke and they go back to New York or D.C. or something like that. So, there's a few Duke people around, but they're not our bread and butter.

Carolina is definitely like what they call the "wine and cheese" crowd, kind of the elite and they expect to win. It's like if Roy Williams like loses in the first round of the NCAA tournament, there will be people calling for Roy Williams to be fired, because they expect to go to the Final Four every year.

Michael O'Connell

You know, when I went to Indiana [University], we never would have considered N.C. people as "wine and cheese" people. We had our own thoughts about who they were.

Rob Roberts

I'm sure there were. And so, the third wheel in this is N.C. State and I have a very soft spot for N.C. State, because N.C. State, they have this terrific backstory. You know, the '83 championship with [Coach Jim] Valvano and everything like that and that feel-good story. But, they're the science and technology school and probably, I guess you could use the word "proletariat." I'll probably regret saying that word. Yeah, a little more proletariat and little more blue collar. They have kind of this third wheel mentality. Because they won national championships — they won in '74 and they won in '83 — they believe that they're at the same caliber as Duke and North Carolina and that they should be treated as such. But they have a very, very rabid fan base and a fan base that like is always hoping to be up to that level and gets very angry and upset when they don't.

Michael O'Connell

They have that really depressed time at the end of March when they're sitting in a bar, crying, and coming to the realization, "Not this year."

Rob Roberts

No, they're going, I have a feeling, by the time of this broadcasts, you can prove me wrong, but I think they're going to win the ACC Tournament this year.

Michael O'Connell

OK, we'll see. [Editor's note: N.C. State lost to top-seeded Miami in the March 16, 2013, semifinal game. Miami went on to beat North Carolina to win the ACC Championship. N.C. State lost in the first round of the 2013 NCAA Tournament to Temple.]

Rob Roberts

But, at the *News & Observer*, we were very unique in that we covered these things like crazy. There were photographers at every game. We do photo galleries at halftime. We do photo galleries after the game ends. We have blogs. We have columnists. We have everything. The ACC Tournament is our Super Bowl pretty much or our presidential election.

So, when I was there I was a multimedia producer who did some of their video work as well. I kind of split my time between doing Flash projects and doing video work.

We managed to somehow get, and it started with football, but when we got into basketball season, I was probably one of the first if not the first newspaper video person to have floor seats at all these games, doing video for a newspaper website. It was pretty amazing to see, number one, we could bounce around the games, so it wasn't one team I was covering. I was there for State and UNC and Duke and got to see the games on the floor. Even North Carolina-Duke, I still was on the floor, which is a big deal for us. Seating's very limited there.

Michael O'Connell

It's like going to see The Beatles and The Rolling Stones at the same concert.

Rob Roberts

And like getting a press pass to do it, which is, they're very highly in demand. It was interesting for me because in the beginning, we did highlights of the game and we did a podcast where our columnist would do like a standup on the baseline after the game. And we had to do it after they wrote their columns for the paper.

Michael O'Connell

Right, of course.

Rob Roberts

After the game ends, it'd probably be 11 at night and I'd actually get to record them and I would be editing footage all night long and putting together this video podcast package after each of the, it was a weekly basis, but after a big game we did it like the next day. It did well. People reacted to it and things like that. But, as the season went on, I started to see that I had this epiphany where I realized that after every game there's always something that happened that people talk about. There's a dunk. There's a fight. There's a bad call. There's a half-court shot at the buzzer, something like that. And there's always something people talk about.

I was like a regular reader of their fan blogs and their insights and forums and things like that. I saw that people were always looking for that and they would go and say things like — I'd spend all night producing this podcast — and they'd say, "Oh, the N&O" — the News & Observer we called N&O — "The N&O has a shot of that dunk. Just go to their podcast and forward to the 50 second mark to see it." They didn't care about anything else. They just wanted the thing.

So, I had this idea. I tried it that after each game I'd try to anticipate what that moment was. That would be the first thing I would do, because I wanted to be the first person to have it.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Rob Roberts

I remember, the first night I did it was when Tyler Hansbrough, [a very awkward 360 dunk](#) in like a game that nobody cared about. It was one of the Christmas games. But people were amazed that this actually happened.

And so, I ran back after the game ended, immediately found that footage that I'd shot, compressed it, did it one time through, did a slow motion version and then there's like audience reaction shot, maybe 15 seconds. Had it up immediately after the game. By far the most popular basketball video that we'd ever done to the magnitude of like 50 times or 100 times. I think now it's, I think it still has 250,000 hits on YouTube and it was also on our N&O site and I think it had several tens of thousands there as well too.

So, I got into that sort of habit afterwards. I'd produced tons of product, so it was like that clip, highlights of the coaches and the players' interviews and then the podcast. But the clip always outperformed. You know, then it changed too in that I would come up with this clip and I'd put it up or I'd have something where I'd see people talking about things in the fan forum. And so, I would like do my own version of it. "Oh, I saw you talking about this foul, I'll give you this version."

But it was like I run into the government now, it was a big step for me to say to the editors, because it would kill me if I had a shot of this and people didn't know I had a shot of it. But it was a hard sell for the editors to say, "Hey, I want to go in these forums. I

want to be transparent about it and say that I work for the N&O. I just want to go in and say, 'Hey, I saw you guys were talking about this. I have another version of it that may give you a different angle on it.' And they were super-appreciative of it. But, you know, there was this whole mentality of sort of like, "We don't want to enter that fray. The newspapers are up here and the fan forums are down here." And it's like, "Is this a proper thing for us to do." It's surprising that, it seems kind of quaint to have that conversation.

Michael O'Connell

And I think that's, I'm hoping that a lot of it is disappearing.

Rob Roberts

This is what we face in government now. You know, where it's like, "Are we part of the conversation?" I mean, there are real questions to be asked here. Obviously, we don't want to get in Twitter wars with people and stuff like that. That's not what the Department of Energy should be doing. But at the same time, people are having this conversation and it's like, "Are we in that conversation or are we above the conversation?" I think there's a level we should be in it.

Michael O'Connell

I think it speaks very much to you need to go where your readers are.

Rob Roberts

Yeah.

Michael O'Connell

Or your whatever they are, listeners, viewers.

Rob Roberts

There's an art to anticipating what people want to do, but you don't want to pander, obviously. But, it's like, in the beginning, we were so committed to the podcast and that people needed that sort of like framing and that's what we provided. But in some ways, what we provided was access. We didn't have the same angle that they saw on ESPN and it wasn't as good because we don't have that same level of equipment or stuff like that. But we provided something different and I had such a great time with it. There were bad calls. There was one I really liked where this kid who played for Georgia Tech basically flopped at the end of the half to try and draw a foul. It ended up, it looked like he knocked himself out that he flopped so well. And it became kind of a controversy because he came back in the game later. If you watch the footage of him in the game later, he's all googley-eyed and everything like that.

But it was like sometimes something, if there was a game-winning shot. I would hear back from people. There was one time where N.C. State won on a last-second dunk and I heard from a coach that he used that for his basketball practice because I had a bad angle on it, where I was on the opposite side of the floor. But he said, "If you watch

the video, you side with the guy who made the initial inbounds pass, ran all the way up the court at full speed and was able to get there and tip the ball in for the win." And he's like, "I use that to instruct my players about the importance of hustling all the time and stuff like that."

Michael O'Connell

It's kind of funny. This goes back to our government conversation about data and information. We gather so much information. What you just described about how going to a game that you were producing content in different platforms and in different ways and then, when you come to the realization that, "OK, well if I pull out this or this piece, then that gets more traffic and stuff." But the fact is, we all produce a lot of content that we're not maybe always highlighting the best way that we should.

Rob Roberts

Right. I think what you find is, you know, in some ways, journalists, government, things like that, think that people want to be told about "The Thing." A lot of times, you find online that people just want "The Thing" so that they can talk about it. That makes sense.

In some places, we see that there's a big audience for opinion and things like that. But other things people don't want our opinion wrapped around it and the value that we can provide is just providing access to the data, to the highlight clip, to the interview. We find a lot of value for kind of getting out of the way sometimes.

Michael O'Connell

I take it, did you see that thing that was on ESPN, was it yesterday or the day before? The Charlotte - Richmond game?

Rob Roberts

No. I didn't see that.

Michael O'Connell

Again, this is going to be a few weeks after we had this discussion. It was all over ESPN and there was a lot of indignation about it, I guess. I'm not sure, I'm such a terrible journalist, I'm not sure which school it was. I want to say it was Charlotte who was behind by three points with like four seconds left. And there was this series of technical fouls that went on that they won by like five points.

Rob Roberts

Yeah.

Michael O'Connell

And the other team really didn't have a chance to do anything. They were sitting on the bench. And so, that was, I mean, yeah, they could've broadcast the whole, shown highlights from the whole game, but that was really the story of the game.

Rob Roberts

Right.

Michael O'Connell

And it was "technically" four seconds, but I think the commentator said it was actually nine minutes in actual time that this terrible thing unfolding. But that was the story. And grabbing that and highlighting that, again, this is good journalism. Recognize what the story is and that's what you should be focusing on.

Rob Roberts

And online you have all these different ways to present it. There, you'd probably just show those strings of technical fouls, a quick-cut thing.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Rob Roberts

I remember one time there wasn't much of a story at this one game other than this freshman at N.C. State had named J.J. Hickson like scored 33 points in a game as a freshman. And so it was like, here's all 33 points. That was the video that came out of it.

Michael O'Connell

Right. Boom, boom, boom, boom.

Rob Roberts

It was foul shots. It was dunks. It was everything else. You find that it, number one, people liked that afterwards and then when he came out early for the draft and was drafted by the Cleveland Cavaliers, they were all looking to find information about him and it spiked up again and it had an even bigger traffic spike a year later when people were trying to find out information about him.

Michael O'Connell

And I know with our own podcast, because we don't talk a lot about actually the production of this, is that it's been an evolution for us. Cause we started out in one place and we've sort of rejiggered how we are presenting things on the website, you know, bringing in the transcripts, providing different aspects of it. We've talked about, "Well, maybe we ought to pull out clips. Maybe we should do this and different things." It's not always one answer. You don't just say, "Oh, I've come to the final answer of how to solve this problem and this is how I'm going to do it." I mean, you've got to look at the story. You've got to look at what you're trying to accomplish and who your readers are and how they're going to use it.

Rob Roberts

It's an evolution. I think you know as an educator one thing that I've learned over the years and I think you guys probably got this when I taught your class was that, my strategy in the beginning was like, "I'm going to lecture, lecture and lecture about all the things you're going to want to do wrong to make you not do it wrong."

And what I found is that regardless of how much you tell people not to something, they're still going to mess up. And a lot of like learning the process of anything is about failure and it's about learning from failure. So now, I've evolved to the point where my mission is to get the camera in their hands as quickly as possible and give them like low-impact assignments where I know they're going to go out and fail and I know that they're all going to go out and make the same mistakes. But they're going to learn from those mistakes. It's like you can't lecture people out of a problem. It's like anything. It evolves and you see what works and what doesn't. It is scary in the online world because everybody's seeing those mistakes. But, at the same time, it's an evolutionary process and you really start to see very transparent feedback about what works and what doesn't.

Michael O'Connell

I know that that's actually one of the things that I know, Megan and Jolie, who used to be a producer here as well, that's one of the things that we always liked about your course and one of the reasons we wanted to bring you in here.

You don't think about it with video, just for example, or whatever the new technology, the new thing that you're learning is, you just figure, "Oh, tell me how to turn on the camera. I'll point it. I'll shoot it." But what you don't realize is that there's a whole level of things, a whole level of thinking that goes into producing a two-minute video. You've got to make choices about what shots you're taking. You've got to think what type of audio you're going to need. You've got to figure out how you're going to edit it. Editing is a whole other world.

Rob Roberts

And I think that's where you really, especially with video, or probably anything, you really see what you're doing wrong when you come back and edit it. There are certain things that everybody does wrong. And they just have to make that mistake. They get the audio wrong or they don't pay enough attention to the audio. They never shoot enough b-roll and they never shoot enough closeups.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Rob Roberts

And everybody does that. A big mistake that newspapers, I think, made when, and are still making, when they've tried to make "everybody's capable of doing video decisions" is that they would typically have the reporter shoot and then hand off to a multimedia producer and an editor to actually edit the piece. As someone who did this quite a bit,

who received this footage quite a bit, it was terrible. And it was like stuff we couldn't work worth. And it had been stuff that we instructed them about in these five shots and shooting closeups and shooting b-roll and that sort of thing. But, because these people didn't have to edit it, they never learned.

I think there's a couple of things there. Number one is failing like this, but then especially in a class environment, you fail and then there's an instructor telling you what you did wrong and then forcing you to do the next assignment.

It's like, a lot of people, if they don't edit, they'll never learn. If they do have to edit, they're probably going to give up after their first video because they're going to think they're terrible and they didn't know what they're doing. But, if you like followup that video with another one, or you fail in another way and then another one where you fail in another way. I tell students in the semester-long classes that I teach where they've had only a small exposure to video that their video projects at least for the vast majority of the semester all about failure. They're going to fail and they're going to fail many times and that by the time they get to the last project of the semester, that's when they're really ready to make that video that they can put in their portfolio and not be horribly embarrassed about it.

It's like you know as an instructor I've moved a little bit past this idea that I'm going to teach you how to do everything in advance to I'm going to teach you things, but I'm going to let you fail. I'm going to provide you with feedback on things and move you forward.

Michael O'Connell

So, what do you think the big challenges facing journalists right now?

Rob Roberts

I think that the challenge that kind of unfortunately helped pushed me out of what we sometimes call journalism-journalism, where job insecurity is a big issue. Especially as a multimedia person, as someone who did video in a newspaper environment, I always felt that my job was safe. But, there was sort of this aura of like —

Michael O'Connell

Invulnerability?

Rob Roberts

Yeah, but more around me the environment around you becomes very toxic, when you're in a situation where people, if people are fearing for their jobs or they're worried about the upcoming round of layoffs or there's yet another furlough coming up.

Michael O'Connell

Or you're dissatisfied with what you're doing.

Rob Roberts

It's natural that going to be a tough environment to work in. I think that's a big challenge facing people. Even if you're in the new media side where you feel like kind of impervious and kind of empowered, you know, there is this sort of like in a lot of organizations there's sort of this general feeling of negativity and worry that is contagious and it's hard to get past.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Rob Roberts

A lot of it's you can't stop for a minute these days, especially if you're in the new media side. It's like, I started off as someone who did a lot of Flash work. Now, people laugh at you if you say that you work in Flash. It's like, "Who would do that?"

Michael O'Connell

You're finger painting.

Rob Roberts

Exactly. It was like a great technology at the time and for newspapers we used Flash a lot because it allowed us to do in these clunky CMS sort of print hybrids that they had us working in at the time.

But you now now it just seems kind of quaint and antiquated, but I spent a lot of time learning Flash and learning how to program in Flash, learning how to do cool stuff in Flash. And it's like, I can take those skills and apply them to HTML5 or Javascript or something like that, but it is different. It's like there's this constant pressure to evolve and this constant fear of being left behind.

And you know, in some ways, it's empowering and it's like exciting to learn all these new things. But other times it's intimidating, especially when you're in a work environment where you're producing daily stuff and you're still having to think long-term about where the technology's going and how things are going. And things change immediately and it can be difficult for people.

Michael O'Connell

So, what are your hopes at this time for journalism and for journalists?

Rob Roberts

I don't know. I do kind of worry sometimes about the state of journalism, especially, I'm a big believer in social media and things like that. But I do, sometimes worry that we're seeing sort of a dumbing down of journalism in terms of, like I hate journalists' Twitter wars. I think that's the most embarrassing thing for journalism, where two journalists

kind of like face off over Twitter. It's like watching an awful schoolyard fight between the two biggest weaklings in the school. It's just embarrassing.

But I think there's a lot to be excited about. We see some very talented kids come out, especially, I think there's a number of schools that are hitting it out of the park with some of the students they have coming up. Like visual journalists coming out of Ohio University are amazing. Some of the data journalism and interactive journalism that they're doing at my alma mater, North Carolina and places like that or Berkeley are staggering, really pushing the envelope of what we used to do like five or 10 years ago when I was in grad school.

I think there's tons of talent coming out. A lot of the talent we're seeing, especially in the data sphere, it's this hybrid of open source guys who can bounce between a startup kind of place to a non profit kind of place to a journalism kind of place. I think that's paying big dividends for the industry right now.

Michael O'Connell

I would agree. It's sort of this melding of — bottom line, getting the information out, whatever platform or wherever its source.

Rob Roberts

Our maps system at Department of Energy and a lot of others uses a technology called MapBox, which is an open source mapping alternative.

It actually comes out of company in D.C., which is a very progressive company. The rumor is that you can't own a car and work at MapBox. I've heard rumors that that is actually true, but I think it's more that none of them do.

But you know, they did a project for all the presidential results with *USA Today*, partnered with Juan Thomassie there and do this innovative thing. So it's sort of like a non profit startup group working with a very established, traditional newspaper using government data to kind of present a product.

We're seeing Sunlight partner with people and definitely utilize open government. So I think we're seeing this different people from different perspectives all kind of working together and using resources from one place and getting data from another place and using technology from another place. I think that makes it kind of exciting. And I think we're seeing that sort of cooperative atmosphere.

As we look now, our maps and data person just left to move back to San Francisco and he was very much this person, somebody, as I look to hire I'm not only looking for someone to do good maps and data, I'm looking for someone who is an emissary to the open source environment, who wants to go to meet ups, who wants to collaborate, who wants to keep an eye on new technology, who wants to take our data and make sure it's

in a form that a developer, an app developer, a journalist can use it. That's becoming really important in the people we're looking for and the people we hire now.

Michael O'Connell

That's really exciting to see what possibilities are out there.

I've been talking to Rob Roberts about a lot of different things, about government, about open source, about basketball. Thanks for coming in Rob.

Rob Roberts

Hey, no problem. It's great to see you guys again and I'm really enjoying the work you guys are doing here.

Michael O'Connell

Oh, thank you very much. You take care.