

Using single-platform social media newsdays in television journalism education: a heutogological approach

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Abstract

Traditionally, journalism education has been a mix of academic and practical classes. It often uses close-to-industry simulations in the form of student news rooms and newsdays which replicate industry practices. For television journalism, this has included newsdays which begin with a 9:00 news conference, and end with the live TV studio news programme. In order to maintain currency, elements such as social media posts have been added alongside the traditional television packaging. However, these aspects have often taken a backseat to the main focus of the studio news programme. In order to address this, I experimented with single-platform social media newsdays; focusing on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

According to a Pew Research report in 2018, about four-in-ten Americans (43%) get news on Facebook. The next most commonly used site for news is YouTube, with 21% getting news there, followed by Twitter at 12%.

Smaller portions of Americans (8% or fewer) get news from other social networks like Instagram, LinkedIn or Snapchat. Further, a Reuters Institute study found a third of young people say social media is their main source for news, more than online news sites, and TV and printed newspapers. Clearly, social is an important platform for delivering news, yet it follows different, and as yet undefined rules of production and delivery. Indeed the grammar of the social media video package is evolving and developing over time.

Newsdays are a good way of instilling industry practice, increasing speed of journalistic newsgathering, and instilling a sense of the professional world students are about to enter. They simulate industry practices and prepare journalism students for expectations of the broadcast industry. As such, encouraging students to include delivery of material to social media platforms alongside considerations for a television studio programme have been encouraged. In teaching television newsdays over several years, there have been efforts to include social media in order to reflect changes in industry practice. However, with deadlines and the lure of the studio lights, social media often took a backseat to more pressing television-specific challenges. Through qualitative interviews with students and journalism educators, this paper looks at an experiment to fully explore the use of social, by turning the traditional approach to television newsdays on its head and instead, making social media the sole focus for some of our newsdays. This included making packages and conducting live reports on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, and led to a better, fuller exploration of these single platforms by targeting them one at a time.

Because this was rather experimental, the students were given most of the control over the way these newsdays were delivered, structured and transmitted. They foresaw problems along the way, and sought to address them themselves. They developed a format for transmission, a visual theme for reports and a style of live reporting as a way of tackling this way of transmitting news. This paper explores the reaction to this heutagogical approach to teaching journalism wherein the students determined how to achieve an end goal of adapting a traditional television newsday, to that of a single social media platform.

Heutagogy: a theoretical framework

Heutagogy is an attractive theoretical concept for teaching journalism because it evokes the kind of experiential learning that seems to translate well to students acquiring skills and being able to perform in a news room situation. It's sometimes called "self-determined learning" (Hase and Kenyon, 2013).

"The essence of heutagogy is that in some learning situations, the focus should be on what and how the learner wants to learn, not on what is to be taught. Hence this approach is very different from the more formal and traditional way of 'teaching' people." (Hase and Kenyon, 2013 p. 7)

Heutagogy has been regarded as the third stage of learning, wherein the first stage is pedagogy, and the second; andragogy (Hase and Kenyon, 2013 p. 184) where "the instructor shows learners how to find information, relates information to the learner experience and places a focus on problem-solving within real-world situations". (Heutagogy and Lifelong Learning: A Review of Heutagogical Practice and, 2012) Heutagogy therefore, is seen as the third stage and "involves higher levels of autonomy [called] self-determined learning." (Hase and Kenyon, 2013)

"In a heutagogical approach to teaching and learning, learners are highly autonomous and self-determined and emphasis is placed on development of learner capacity and capability with the goal of producing learners who are well-prepared for the complexities of today's workplace." (Heutagogy and Lifelong Learning: A Review of Heutagogical Practice, 2012)

The Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) which is the broadcast industry-approved accreditation body in the UK and accredits both the Broadcast Journalism Bachelor of Arts undergraduate programme and the Master of Arts in Journalism post graduate programme at Leeds Trinity University advocates experiential learning. It says its:

"accreditation standards are very much based on direct and practical experience and all accredited courses are valued by teachers and students, employers and employees, as they are relevant and responsive to the operational demands of the broadcast industry." (Bjtc.org.uk, 2019)

This is why the practice of newsdays is such an important component to successful accreditation, and why it forms such a key aspect of the broadcast journalism curriculum. Additionally, it also fits in with the heutagogical approach to learning.

Newsdays for learning

Newsdays are an important aspect of journalism education because they become an active learning situation. Students who have been taught skills such as interviewing, research, sourcing of stories, and technical aspects such as filming and editing, bring these skills together to produce broadcasts which mimic that of industry. The more realistic the situation in terms of deadlines, ethical and legal considerations, time pressures and technical ability, the greater the potential for the student to learn and be prepared for the workplace. This

experiential learning, or learning-by-doing means that students are put under deadline pressures which they will face in industry. It helps prepare them for this whilst testing their accumulated knowledge and skills. It also falls in line with the idea of problem-based learning where students are guided to work together to achieve the best outcome; that of an industry-acceptable television broadcast. Newsdays:

"...have several different learning and teaching functions: they are assessable tests of students' journalistic and technical abilities; they provide a framework in which students gain understanding of how newspapers and broadcast shows come together and what is realistically possible under technological and professional conditions." (de Burgh, 2003)

Phil Race (Race, 2007) believes that the most effective form of learning is experiential: learning by doing. Experiential learning:

"should also allow people to decide how to meet objectives, encourage them to be open about problems and use mistakes as learning opportunities, provide opportunities to learn new skills, provide frequent feedback, encourage people to experiment with new methods, and support efforts to implement learning from a classroom course." (Brandon, 2002)

This is a guiding principal in journalism education where students don't just study the field, but engage in actively doing it. These newsdays provide real world experience for our prospective broadcasters, and fit in with the theory of problem-based, experiential and heutagogical learning – where students are tasked with producing the news each day, fulfilling roles in the newsroom as editors, reporters, presenters and technical operators and meeting strict deadlines to find their own way to reach the endpoint of transmission. The classroom becomes a working newsroom during these periods. This sort of experiential learning is essential in the education of journalism students, where "learning is active, meaningful and relevant to 'real life' agendas." (Weil, S. and McGill, I. (1989) p. 7)

"Students can gain a lot of feedback while they do practical work. They get very rapid feedback just by seeing how the work itself proceeds, and often get even more feedback by watching and talking with fellow students working alongside them." (Race, 2007, p. 75)

As part of the BJTC accreditation requirements, students must complete fifteen newsdays during the second and three year of their BA Journalism course. Courses approach this requirement differently: some with newsdays once a week; others in consecutive days. The approach at Leeds Trinity is to complete three weeks, working Monday through Friday consecutively, in radio, broadcasting news hourly on the established Bradford Community Radio station, and three weeks of television programming live-streamed on Yorkshire-Voice.com. Both the radio and television work is outward-facing and live, which requires tutors to be highly involved in the broadcasts to ensure legal compliance and ethical considerations as well as those of a technical nature. This is not always the case with other universities who feel that it is too risky to allow students to broadcast live and outward facing. However, this is one aspect we pride ourselves on at Leeds Trinity because it produces such a realistic broadcasting environment.

Students take on the usual newsroom roles which include those of presenter, reporter, editorial roles such as news editor and producer, as well as technical roles such as vision mixer, autocue operator, and camera operator. These roles are usually rotated daily to ensure each student gets exposure to all of the roles and can see where their strengths and weaknesses lie. As far as the broadcast is concerned, there are quality issues since the roles held on any given day are likely to be done by students new to them. However it is all part of the learning experience. This real-world experience is intense and stressful for students but also puts real world pressures on them to produce journalism in a timely way. It is hoped this maximizes the learning experience for the student.

As well as focusing on the daily television broadcast, students are also tasked with making use of our social media platforms and our website, Yorkshire-Voice.com and we have always encouraged the use of our in-house Yorkshire Voice on the Twitter and Facebook platforms as a means of additionally publishing news stories. However, when the main focus is on hitting the 4pm deadline, efforts are usually concentrated on the broadcast and the social media platforms whose deadlines are not as exacting, are often dropped or ignored. To address this, social media editor has been a role added to the rota. However, illness, story deadlines and other considerations mean that this is one area usually regarded as non-essential. In the 2016/17 external examiners report, it was suggested we go further than the traditional radio or television news output to include news production on social media platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat). The BJTC backed up this suggestion in their own accreditation report the same year. It is also backed up through reading around the subject as described by Hill and Bradshaw:

'Distributed content' is a strategic approach to publishing whereby social media platforms are used not to 'drive traffic' to the publisher's own website, but instead to host content that only, or primarily, exists within that platform. Content produced this way is typically called 'native' content: in other words, it is native to

Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat or whichever platform it has been published to, rather than having been first published elsewhere.” (2019, p. 139)

Research bears out the concept that mobile journalism is increasing in significance in people’s lives, especially young people’s. “There is increasing awareness of the significance of mobile phones as part of young people’s media biographies (Staid, 2008) and the potential to co-opt them as learning devices generally (Prensky, 2008) and for journalism training in particular.” (Theendofjournalism.wdfiles.com, 2019)

In order to address this, I introduced the idea of single platform social media news days to replace some of our more traditional newdays so that the entire focus for the students for that particular newday would be on one social media platform. This fell in line with a heutagogical style of learning wherein the students were tasked to produce news for the platform but given very little other guidance.

In keeping with skills prized by the industry (through discussions during a Knowledge Exchange conference in June 2016 wherein I discussed the issue with head of BBC North, Helen Thomas) I established that journalists who could package news as well as go live were sought after. Therefore I suggested a combination of the two types of outputs. Students were tasked to each produce one live report and one packaged video story for each newday. The organisation of those reports was left up to them as a problem to solve. It was the students themselves who decided to schedule the day mixing up live spots with pre-packaged news at regular intervals and how these newdays should look to an audience.

How it worked

The students quickly established a Whatsapp group to share story ideas and as a means of communications leading up to the first newday, which was delivered on Facebook. They devised a theme for the video packages with consistent colouring, a watermark to copyright the work, consistent Yorkshire Voice branding among other things, and circulated the specifications on the group discussion forum. They investigated the requirements of each platform (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) in terms of broadcast production (maximum length of packages, specifications such as widescreen or square, portrait vs landscape etc), and ensured this information was shared amongst the group.

In keeping with the student-centred approach, my role as module leader was to guide the process, and act as a sounding board, rather than to construct the way this new style of broadcasting would occur. What happened was that the students took the organisation of the news days in hand. The producer of the day quickly realised that it would not be good to try and have two student reporters attempting to broadcast live at the same time. Similarly, it was felt that the mix between live reports and pre-produced packages should be interspersed throughout the day so that there was a regular flow of news and features from our newsroom.

The first student producer decided to establish a schedule of output every twenty minutes. With a cohort of twelve students there were twenty-four slots created mixing between live reports and packages. This ensured our student newsroom was publishing throughout the news day. The first student news editor decided there should be a corporate feel to the packaged reports, so on-screen captions were used for all interview clips. A consistent theme was established so that the same font and colours were used and a Yorkshire Voice endtitles used at the end of each package. These were decisions made by the students themselves, taking into consideration what the industry was doing and emulating the best practices into their own style.

There was a high level of learning. Each platform required investigation prior to the newday. The platforms vary in whether they accept landscape or portrait filming. They vary in the length of video that can be hosted. The parameters change from time-to-time as platforms are updated. They vary in terms of how live reports are set up and produced. These aspects were learned along the way with the students feeding back to each other via Whatsapp group conversations to ensure everyone was aware of how to avoid mistakes which did occur – such as using more traditional styles of television packaging which didn’t work on social media, and how not to appear sideways during a live transmission.

Student Feedback

Students were generally very positive about the single platform newdays. They found it relevant to their future careers and allied more closely to their experience as news consumers. One student said she’d been offered paid work because the employer was able to see what she was doing on an outward-facing platform, and because it was relevant experience for that work. Another found that it allied very closely with the experience on work placement in industry where her social media skills were put to good use. Still another

commented that the skills used to make packages for social media improved her television news packaging skills.

Not only were the social media single platform newscasts a success, but by tackling them first, the students were more open to using social media alongside the traditional television broadcasts once we'd returned to them toward the end of the semester.

"It's great that we've done lives especially on different platforms because it teaches you how to utilise them in different ways; how to communicate with audiences, and just generally broadens out your skills and it's just catching up with modern technology and modern journalism. Like a lot of BBC use Facebook lives so it's great to know all those skills." - student, May 2018.

"Having a course that does that - having social media days that are specific to a certain [social media] platform means that we have a lot of time to focus and work out what we need to do [when we are trying to get a job]" – student, May 2018.

"We got to work with a lot of social media, like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook which is really important because social media is really the way forward now....This is something that employers are really looking for. I've had work offered outside of uni [sic] just because people have seen what I've produced on these newscasts." - student, May 2018.

This practice has also met with a very positive response from the BJTC which accredits our courses.

"We expect a high level of experiential learning through those newscasts and a good part of that will be applying those social media skills into a newscast output and people like Leeds Trinity and others are applying that on their newscasts in quite a unique way at the moment and it really does make the students ready to go out and work in the real world." Chief Executive Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC)

Colleague Feedback

I have outlined the experiment with single platform newscasts at previous conferences. The response from other journalism lecturers has been very positive, and several said they would look to introduce more outward-facing, social media news reporting in their own newscasts.

"In regards to the comprehensive social media news day focused presentation from Katherine Blair at the AJE Summer conference in Canterbury, I can say I am very impressed. The utilisation of strict social media targets and platforms including Instagram packaging has been of valuable usage to me as an educator in implementing a new social strand to our news days and weeks. We are also reviewing the inclusion of this for MA news assessments. I have already drawn on the knowledge delivered by Katherine earlier this trimester by bringing in a Periscope/Facebook Live and Instagram Stories news day for 4th year BA honours students" (Journalism Lecturer, November 2018)

"The information about incorporating social media into news days, presented ... was both creative and innovative. Her practice is cutting edge in the teaching of skills for a rapidly changing industry. As a result, her ideas and practice were of great interest to other conference attendees and some other lecturers have taken up and incorporated her practice into their own teaching." (Lecturer, November 2018)

Tutor Reflection

The students in this cohort are those I have taught throughout their three-year degree. In the past I had struggled to convey some basics of television news primarily because students tend not to view news programmes in a linear way. In student accommodation, they generally do not have televisions, or pay the license fee. They prefer to watch online which means watching stories out of context with the rest of the day's news. That means they distance themselves from some of the cultural grammar of television news production. However, because social media news content is much more part of their every day experience, they grasped ways of producing news for social media much more intuitively. They understood what was expected in terms of production because they were used to consuming news in this way. They were much more active learners because they recognised that they were as much experts as their tutor. They were also more likely to take confidence in their decisions about how to produce news than they were with traditional television which they sometimes regarded as old-fashioned.

What impressed me was their confidence in making decisions themselves, without referring back to me as their tutor. They seemed to sense that there were no rules in social media news production, so they felt more comfortable with making decisions about the way to approach it. I also felt they had a better sense of how

to approach news production with innovative ways of news distribution.

They generally used mobile phones for filming, and this was something that continued when we went back to our traditional television studio based newscasts, despite having easy access to larger JVC cameras.

Assessment and the use of Student-Negotiated Assessment

The decision of how to assess the module was left to the students as part of the Leeds Trinity University Learning & Teaching Strategy which encourages student-negotiated assessment. This was something I have tried in other modules in the last couple of years, after explaining the learning outcomes of the module as well as asking students what they expect and want to learn from the module. Often students request a number of assessments in the belief that spreading marks out amongst a series of assessments will better their chances to get the best overall mark. They also tend to dislike group work. In order to successfully execute a newscast with the associated news production, group work is essential. Aleksander Kocic (2017) acknowledges that group work is not always popular because they may not take individual efforts into account. Students generally don't like to have their marks held hostage by other students who may lack engagement.

In the case of the module described in this paper, students decided that in order to be allowed to experiment and to fail, that only one of their video packages (from a possible five news days; both single-platform social media and traditional television news broadcasts) should be submitted, as well as one live report. In order to ensure all students contributed on each of the newscasts, I built into the requirements that although only their best work would be assessed, they were still required to submit on each newscast .

The student submission took the form of an individual report which reflected on their work and the work of the group and linked to the individual packages and live reports. This gave the added opportunity of students being able to examine and put forward evidence for their performances in key roles such as producer and news editor amongst others.

This seemed popular with students because their best work was being assessed, and there was less reliance on the group in order to do well in the module. Some of the work neared the quality of that broadcast or published by more established news organisations. However, much did not, and that remains the focus for teaching in the upcoming academic year.

Next steps

Single-platform newscasts have been a very good way of focusing on the individual aspects of one social media platform and for students to fully explore more than just their favoured social media channel. However, the reality is that journalism requires reaching out to audiences on more than one social media channel for the same story. My next step will be to try and add a social media newscast which makes use of at least three social media platforms for the same story so that students learn how to reversion material and change it for the various platforms. This will require good understanding of how different audiences view the different platforms and how material can be reused and reconfigured to meet the requirements of the platforms.

Conclusions

Focusing on one social media platform for publishing news on a single newscast has meant students have benefitted from getting to understand the nature of the platform, the requirements and processes for delivery, and how that platform performs in terms of engaging an audience. It has stretched students so they explore platforms they might not otherwise be comfortable with and has meant they have a better awareness of the culture surrounding these platforms.

Using a social media platform as a means of 'broadcasting' news was a good way of learning the differences between traditional television news packaging and that of social media. It also meant students were actively recognising problems and were seeking answers to issues that arose along the way themselves, and then sharing their knowledge with the news team.

Choosing one social media platform for a sole news day meant social media was the forefront of students' minds and not an afterthought or something that happened if there was time. It was the focus of their attention and meant brought out new skills from them as they are active consumers of news on social media. This experiment allowed them to become active producers of news on social media as well.

It allowed students to become self-directed learners, or heutagogical learners without realising it. In order to have a successful newscast, they had to figure out a way of doing so on a social media platform without a roadmap to do so. In effect they made it up as they went along, followed their instincts, incorporated what

they knew and produced some news along the way.

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