

We're all storytellers now...

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At the forefront of any university journalism department discussion is a simple question: what kind of people do we want our graduates to be? With what skills do we want them to step out in the real world and – perhaps more daringly – what kind of personality?

The time of journalism being a marginal university degree are gone, but more importantly there has been little coherence about how it should be taught at higher education institutions (Evans, 2014). It's a cliché to say the industry's shifting underfoot every second, but trying to pin down what a new journalism graduate is expected to be is fundamental if we are supposed to train the next generation (White, 2016).

We live in a post-convergence world. So-called pathways are breaking down more quickly than we can name them. We think we can define a modern journalist, but are they, "someone who works for a printed product, radio or television? In which particular roles? Are photographers or videographers journalists? Or can a journalist also be someone who breaks news on social media?" (White, 2016). And that's not even counting those who work on the commercial side, whether that's in branded content (sometimes known as native advertising) or simply selling curated content to providers.

The response, surely, is to revisit what we perceive to be journalism education. We are too content to repeat and re-affirm the lessons of the past, rather than attempting to broaden or invigorate (Stephens & Hart, 2009).

So then, how? Our solution was to take concepts we've been using and refining for years – news days, making audio and video etc. – and break them down. Furthermore, look more closely at how modern media newsrooms are actually defined and adhere strongly to that. Above all, be more honest about what our students are likely to be doing the moment they take off their mortarboard and gown.

And that means storytelling. Not thinking about anything other than how best to tell the story. Identifying the story and being open to presenting it in way that suits it. This skill, this openness to innovation and freedom of expression, has for some time been consigned to the background of journalism education. Too concerned with following the traditions learned and understood by themselves to mean journalism, aging hackademics have often re-enforced the invisible barriers between media disciplines, forgetting that above all journalism relies on creativity and imagination as much as it does on technical knowledge and craft (Evans, 2014)

Because we generally struggle to comprehend the new methods – often due to a lack of recent experience in BuzzFeed-esque newsrooms – it's much easier to draw the kinds of strict lines that used to exist, rather than acknowledging the blurring of them.

"The ways in which news is reported, written, packaged, and produced are being redefined by decidedly nontraditional organizations...Organizational management structures within media companies, too, are evolving." (Webb, 2015, p.4)

This isn't evil. This isn't something to be feared. This isn't an excuse to argue how much better it was in the old days. Employers still want excited and inquisitive people, but they also want staff who can think more closely about audience (White, 2016). Washington Post editor Marty Baron still believes that stories should be well-reported and well-told, but also wants openness to innovation (Stephens, 2014).

In fact, Stephens and Hart (2008) argue, "the profession often tends to be more adventurous than the professors."

There is significant research evidence to suggest that journalism education is struggling to keep pace with the developments and demands of the profession and it is easy to understand why. The question that we need to be asking is how to develop a curriculum that remains responsive to a volatile and dynamic environment where change is the only constant. The advent of Web 2.0 has made it necessary for an overhaul of journalism education and journalistic practice so they can continue to serve their socially assigned purposes (Seizov, 2016).

Over the past decade or so when media has seen the rapidest and most radical changes, thanks to the growth and explosion of digital technology and social media, the recurring pattern has been an emphasis on 'storytelling' in a way that is increasingly 'platform agnostic'. One way to ensure journalism students are

able to adapt and thrive in the new ‘normal’ media world might be to develop a curriculum that focuses on storytelling without defining pathways and platforms too rigidly. By doing this, even as platforms, apps and forms keep evolving, the curriculum with storytelling as the central theme and an emphasis on professional skills that prepare students to seek out and stay current in their ability to tell stories using whatever the latest and most sought-after media are, will serve the needs of students and the profession better.

Interestingly, while journalism educators have been more receptive to the idea of including new skills and technology, there has been a general reluctance to shake-up traditional boundaries and challenge long-established domains.

In the mid-to-late 90s and the early 2000s, news media in many countries, particularly in the West, began to work towards an online presence. While the primary offering was through the dominant platform (print, radio or television), a web presence was gaining popularity.

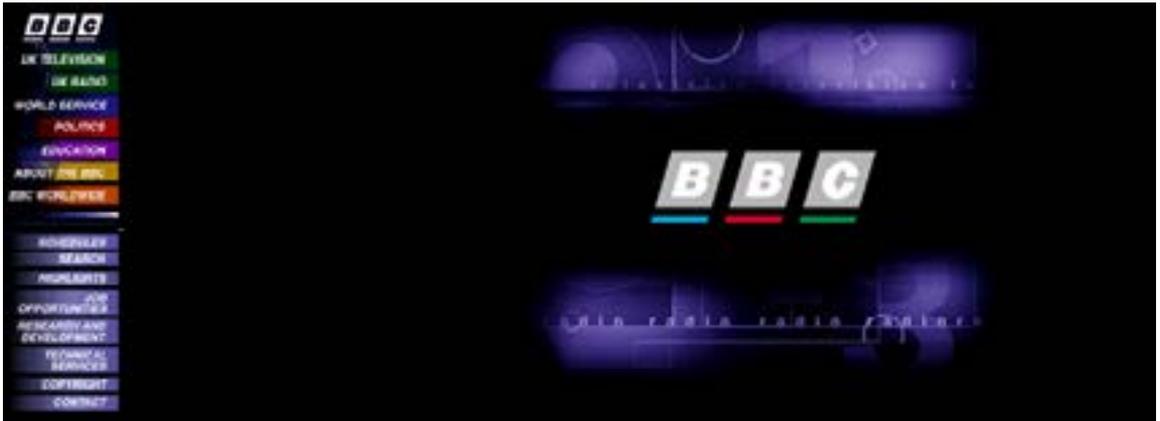
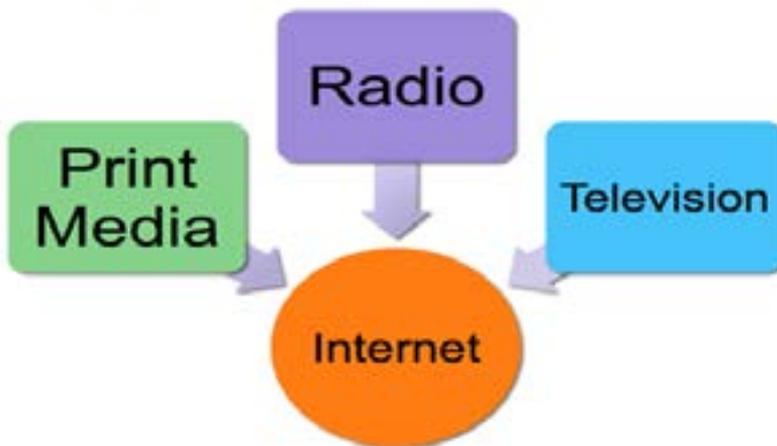


Figure 1: BBC Archive April 28 1997 screenshot

It was around this time that journalism educators increasingly began to recognise the importance of computer-assisted reporting in journalism education as it was felt that with this, it was unlikely that many journalism program graduates would find themselves at a loss if expected to use this source on the first day of employment (Fico & DeFleur, 2002). There was still no argument at this point to move away from media and pathways as the profession continued to recognize these differences.

The beginning...

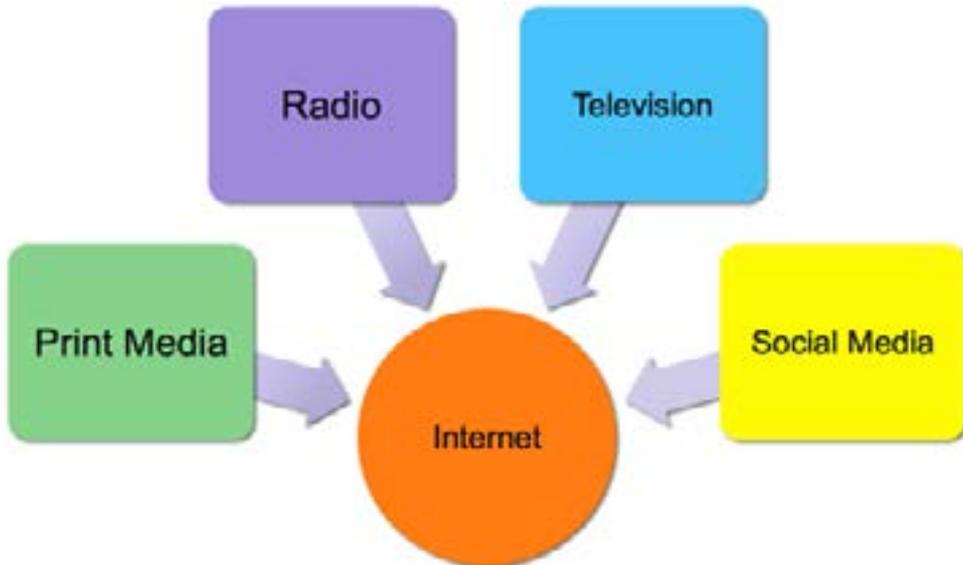
Media brands and medium identifiable



Medium and pathway relevant and necessary in curriculum design

Table 1: With the arrival of Facebook and Twitter, both journalists and journalism educators also began to talk about including social media journalism in their curriculum.

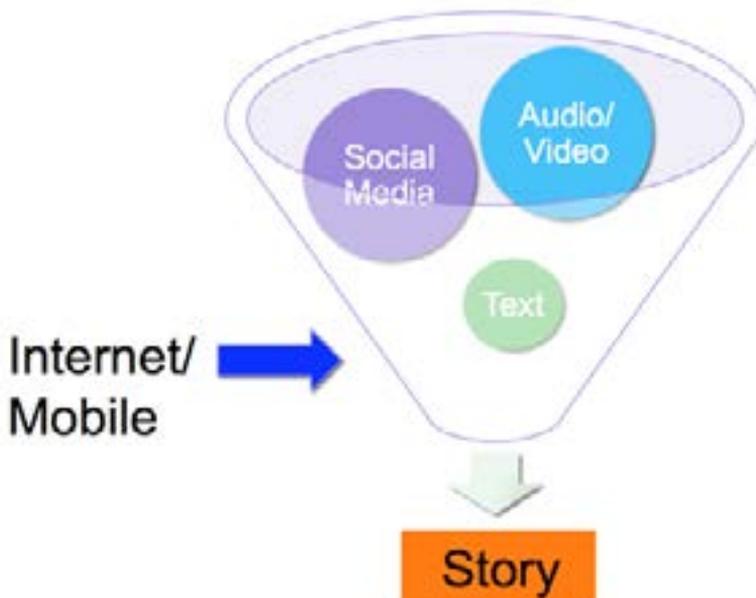
Media brands and medium identifiable + social media arrives on scene



In addition to medium and streams, social media journalism added to syllabus

Table 2: It was a little later, in the early to mid 2000s, that convergence became a part of the conversation and leading institutions had already begun their move towards convergence.

Media Brands identifiable, converged media



Convergence becomes the buzz word in journalism education

Table 3: A 2003 survey of a sample of forty-six top-tier journalism programmes found that 85% have begun to pursue curricula that address media convergence, but most schools still maintain separate tracks for print and broadcast (Daniels & Becker, 2005).

Even as convergence was gaining currency in the media world, the increasing use of smartphones to access news meant that content had to be simultaneously produced or repurposed for different platforms and devices. The Digital News Report 2016 published by the Reuters Institute reveals that in terms of main device, the mobile/tablet now outstrips the computer. According to the report, the UK has reached the mobile tipping point with a publisher like the BBC reporting that around 70% of traffic now comes from mobile devices. The use of smartphones to access news is understandably more prevalent among younger users, who also tend to consume news predominantly on social media, with brands losing their distinct identity.

“When we ask people about the main way in which they come across news stories we see that people use social media more on the smartphone, whilst they are less likely to use a branded entry such as a website or app. This is true even if we take account of the fact that smartphone users tend to be younger and tend to use social media more.” (Reuters Digital News Report 2016)

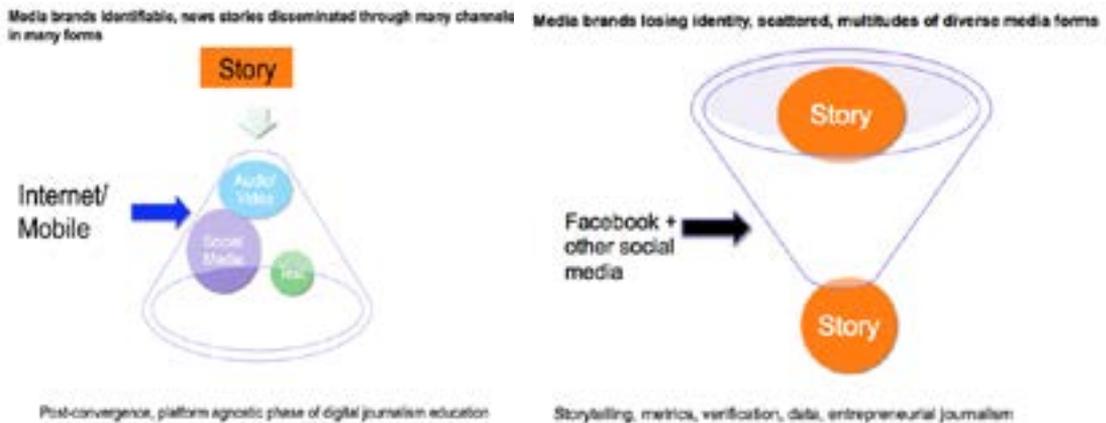


Table 4: brands still identifiable **Table 5: brands lose identity**

In 2015, Facebook, the largest player in the social media space with over 1.2 billion users globally, also began to allow media houses to publish directly to Facebook through its Instant Articles feature. Articles published directly to Facebook largely followed the format and style of the social network, stripping some of the uniqueness of the media brands the stories originated from.

Increasingly, we are reaching a stage where news is largely consumed through social media, amorphous when it comes to platform identity, complex in terms of being identifiable by source (news brand, professional journalist Vs citizen journalist) and nebulous in distinguishing between news and opinion.

The innovation lag (DeFleur & Davenport, 1993) between journalism classrooms and the realities of the media world is getting bigger and needs to be addressed in a way that will future-proof the curriculum without diluting core values and concepts that have added value and purpose to an academic degree in journalism.

In this sea of confusion and incessant disruption, by turning our attention to storytelling as a singularity, journalism educators can reinforce core journalism values and ethics and equip students to become trusted curators.

The profession of journalism

The module coded 235MC at Coventry University is a 2nd year Journalism module also known as The Profession of Journalism.

The module descriptor explains:

“This module sets out to transform you from a student journalist to a practitioner capable of working at a professional level...The learning environment will recreate a working rolling news environment, complete with live assignments and deadlines. Students will be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to work in such a professional multi-media newsroom.” (Coventry University, 2016)

But what does this really mean? In the 2015-16 academic year, it meant the entire cohort producing a live TV in Term 1 and in Term 2, they were divided into TV, radio and Online groups to produce outward-facing material within those capacities.

It was over-archingly successful. In the module evaluation questionnaire, 100% of the students said it was “intellectually stimulating and engaging”, whilst 100% also said the “quality of this module was satisfactory”. In their written comments, participants praised the “hands-on work”, the “tasks” and the “practical” nature of the module.

However, it’s also clear that curriculum development is often too slow-paced (Webb, 2015). There needs to be a sense of urgency in reacting and responding to our, for want of a better word, clients. Change comes slowly in academic departments, which is not conducive to effective teaching.

As such, we read the negative comments in the module evaluation. There weren’t many, but one clear one said in the section for areas to improve, “make the newsdays multi-platform, more emphasis on online, social media”.

Utilising my own professional experience in the Yahoo UK newsroom, the solution came instantly. Throw out the words TV, radio and online in any course literature. Think of the outlet as merely a delivery system, not a form of media in and of itself. Talk about teams as part of an integrated whole, not a form of division. And change the portfolio requirements to create “artifacts”. Not packages, or pieces, or articles, or shows, but a more nebulous word which can mean a variety of things.

These are not new ideas. This is not revolutionary. But it’s about changing the mindset of the course so that we are in sync with, rather than chasing, modern working methods. Editors have to be quick to adapt in a variety of areas (White, 2016), why not journalism departments or module leaders too? We have to admit to ourselves that journalism teaching is generally focused on training students to work in so-called traditional media environments (Evans, 2014). We can also tell ourselves that it’s okay to experiment. The only way to succeed is to use our students as, if you will, guinea pigs – to have a vision we want to achieve but then be prepared to hone, refine and improve if necessary.

It is our job as educators to define new agendas for training (White, 2016). Amy Webb suggests that curriculum redesign involves a host of possibly intransigent stakeholders whose intractability can be the enemy of progress (Webb, 2015). But we would argue that maximising change by understanding and implementing based on the fluidity of the module descriptor year-by-year, even month-by-month should not just be encouraged, but mandatory.

The new 235MC

“The module aims to recreate a professional journalism office where you will work in specific jobs for a public-facing media outlet as an editorial team. You will have to apply for the job you would like to do and sit in front of an interview panel to try and get it.” (Falk & Coventry University, 2016)

This is the mission statement of the revised module. Every member of the cohort works together under a student-governed editorial hierarchy in pursuit of one simple goal – make the product (known as iCov) great. Choosing an audience and engaging that audience by telling stories using any means they choose or desire.

Students apply for the job they want, undergo job interviews with the module leader and a member of the university careers team so they take ownership of their position and ideally want to do it to the best of their ability.

235MC is, according to the module descriptor, expected to, “implement a range of professional norms – including standards of personal conduct toward colleagues, ethical practice and adherence to deadlines, which govern journalism practice in a newsroom.” (Coventry University, 2016).

We are trying to achieve this by unifying the cohort and getting them to understand that what they are doing is telling stories together in a variety of ways under the same umbrella, with the same ultimate goal.

People work in teams, just like at, for example, Yahoo UK or BuzzFeed or Vice. But there is a greater sense of interaction amongst a larger group (45 students), an improved idea of working for a single entity rather than a series of individual or small group projects that can frequently propagate in news day-based modules. There is also a clear adherence to Marty Baron’s underlying principles to ensure participants are “being challenged to do work that is superior in its understanding, insights and presentation” (Stephens & Hart, 2009), at least in its attempt.

Fundamentally, storytelling is king; emulating reality to the best of our ability is paramount – while the module and to some degree the course itself is being interrogated pedagogically. Importantly, the students

themselves also have a stake in the transition, which may or may not yet succeed. As long as we are open to reflecting-in-action on the changes however, any failings can potentially be rectified.

Future-proofing

If we are going to ensure the viability of our courses and more importantly the quality of our graduates, then we need to future-proof. Of course this comes as a response to the technological revolution (Stephens & Hart, 2009), but it's also about absorbing and synthesising the kinds of skills the UK journalistic accreditation bodies demand, while recognising that successfully doing that doesn't create the finished, ready-for-work human article (Evans, 2014).

Don't impose your – out-of-date – experience

We're old. However many Twitter followers we have, we're still old.

That doesn't alter the amount we understand and can teach about the fundamentals of storytelling. Or how to work in an office environment, or how to frame shots on a camera or pin down a source – perhaps the kinds of critical thinking that some consider the immutable skills of journalism (Webb, 2015). But what it does mean is that there needs to be a caveat in how we present what success looks like to graduates now, or how we prepare them for their likely very different careers to ours.

A lot of students still define themselves by the traditional model. How do we shock them out of that?

One of the most difficult aspects of this change is that the students themselves sometimes don't realise that they are living in this transitional media world. At open days, when asked what they want to do, there are frequent replies of “print journalism” which they perceive to mean the Times or Cosmopolitan. Of course that is still a valid and valuable element of the industry – but it shows that the traditional constructs of media are still prevalent, even if these youngsters haven't actually ever bought a physical copy of the paper they aspire to work for.

Being told they aren't sure whether to come on the course because “it doesn't seem to be writing-focused” is confusing because it demonstrates they don't understand there is writing intrinsic in almost every facet of the industry, including magazine-style feature writing on the Web.

This requires hackademics to a) stop using the language of the past, such as TV, radio, etc. and think more realistically about how modern organisations work. It's about instilling the thrill of being in the middle of a story and having the responsibility of communicating what's happened (Webb, 2015).

Above all, it is our job to interpret an uncertain future for our students who may not understand it yet themselves, even if they are already consuming and even contributing to it.

Be prepared to alter and react on the fly

If nothing else, it will make for a more enjoyable teaching experience. Still, it's useful to remember that “if the journalism we have, if the methods we are defending, were more perfect, maybe this resistance to experimentation would be less of a problem.” (Stephens & Hart, 2014). This includes simple changes, like altering the language of our Moodles and module books.

Think about monetisation and commercialism

Neil White is clear on this and it's a skill drilled into editors at new-model media companies like BuzzFeed. As one editor from the outlet explained, “It would be helpful for journalists to understand that what they do is monetized...The editors at BuzzFeed understand that we need to make money and they understand the business model. That's important.” (Webb, 2015)

Writing, recording and filming stuff will never go out of fashion

Don't worry – it just won't. As editor Kevin Riley of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution told Amy Webb, “Our capacity to tell stories has never been greater than it is right now.”

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