

The disappearing newsroom and the backpack journalist: challenges and opportunities

By Deborah Wilson David, Nottingham Trent University

Over the summer vacation, whilst trying to take a much-needed break, journalism educators were multi-scenario planning for the 2021-22 academic year. No matter which higher education institution, the main consideration was what the ‘new normal’ was likely to be.

There were plans being put together for 100% on campus teaching, 100% online, and all possibilities and variations in between – including the widely detested hybrid delivery class.

Common sense dictated, as we faced the coronavirus becoming a permanent fixture in one form or another, that we would be looking at a greater proportion of remote operation with working from home widely accepted as a necessary part of the educator’s week. But for courses which involve production teaching as a significant part of the curriculum, and specialist facility usage an integral characteristic of delivery, how important is it to get the students into our campus newsrooms?

The last 18 months have seen a rapid and creative evolution in the remote delivery of practice-based teaching, continuing to recreate the industry environment wherever possible and appropriate, giving our students that real-life feel of the newsroom operation and replicating professional practice.

However, we know students have a real hunger to work together in newsrooms, and in radio and tv studios, and having the opportunity to resume at least some of that in-person activity from 8 March this year was well received.

No return to the comfort zone

There was an understandable temptation, as workplaces were reopening, for some journalism educators to want to return to their comfort zone; the ‘old’ normal and fully resume in-person, newsroom-based teaching. The pandemic has forced the speed and direction of change in journalism practice. It is clear, and employers and accreditation bodies concur with this, that the future for journalism is hybrid working, and to avoid embracing that poses the risk that journalism education will lag behind current and rapidly evolving professional practice. The essence of the vocational element of journalism education is that it should mirror professional practice so we can effectively prepare practitioners for the workplace, but also anticipate the future of the news industries and produce reflective, creative, and skilled journalists who can compete for jobs that do not yet exist.

Developments in technology have meant that an entire news operation, in terms of newsgathering and news delivery for both broadcast and non-broadcast organisations, can work remotely with less use needed of in-situ facilities. Our industry partners all tell us they are not using newsrooms and studio complexes in the same way as they did pre-Covid and some of that new way of working is likely to continue. One told me, referring to what is the likely scenario for the BBC: “We think that around 60% of colleagues in local TV and radio will gradually move to hybrid working – largely based at home with occasional travel to the office.”¹

This echoes the moves in office working, where despite some vacillation between plans for extensive work from home post-Covid, and the subsequent drive to bring office workers back to their workplace, the consensus appears to have settled between these parameters with most offices retaining some element of working from home.²

1 Personal communication with Kevin Stanley, NUJ Secondee, BBC National and Regions. 7 September 2021

2 Numerous reports, including this in the Financial Times from September 6 2021: “UK employers plot return of office workers” <https://www.ft.com/content/83740583-7717-4aa3-babf-d880bccb1c85> and this from the Press Association in the Guardian, 28 Au-

In my own region, the East Midlands, Reach has closed newsrooms as part of its plans to have many of its journalists working remotely. Lincoln has closed, Derby is following, and then Leicester. The Nottingham Post, whilst at the time of writing is still to reopen post pandemic, remains one of Reach's regional 'hubs'³ but has plans for a reduced occupancy with journalists on a rota, booking their days in the newsroom in advance. Last year JPIMedia announced plans for the closure of 11 of its newspaper offices, citing staff preferences for increased home working. JPIMedia chief executive David King also acknowledged the benefits to the business: "Aligning agile working with the review of our property portfolio will help us to better sustain jobs and titles for the longer term".⁴

Move to increased regionalisation

In local media there was already a move towards increased regionalisation to cut costs, in terms of both staffing and overheads, in local radio, newspapers and regional television news.

The shrinking footprint of newsrooms and studios is not completely new, some was already happening pre-pandemic and not just at the local level. In 2012 - 2013 the BBC combined its three main network newsrooms in London: Bush House, home to the BBC World Service newsroom, was vacated in 2012, then the news operation in Television Centre left the west of London in 2013. They were combined with the BBC's radio news operation in New Broadcasting House, which now is home to the newsroom which serves all BBC News across all their radio and all TV networks.

BBC Local Radio stations closed many of their district studios in 2012, with the announcement about the remaining 20 last year saying these small regional, and usually unstaffed, satellite sites were no longer needed: "... the huge leaps forward in mobile technology and connectivity make an office with an ISDN line an expensive anomaly."⁵ Commercial local radio has also been closing studios following increased mergers and buyouts in recent years to construct de facto networks by groups such as Global and Bauer Radio.⁶

Over the years I was at the University of Lincoln I watched the Lincolnshire Echo diminish from a daily publication with its own printing presses, to a smaller building, then a smaller office, and now it has no office at all.

The Nottingham Post still has a newsroom and offices for the commercial teams to work from, but they need to provide space for journalists from elsewhere in the region coming in albeit on a rationed basis. One news editor told me they would be surprised to see any newspaper offices in the region in five years' time.

From a business perspective it could be fair to say that with constrained budgets, these savings on buildings and overheads, may help protect or even create more journalists' jobs. Indeed Newsquest, Reach and JPIMedia have all been recruiting in recent months.⁷ Meanwhile the hyperlocal news platform, Nub News, which is a network of news websites launched in September 2018 and now serves more than 60 towns in the UK, have employed over 30 journalists and they plan to take on at least 30 more in the next 12 months.⁸ But they have no newsrooms.

Mike Sassi, formerly editor of the Nottingham Post until 2019, is Nub News' recently appointed editorial director.⁹ Speaking to me before he was appointed to this role, Sassi said that Karl Hancock, Nub News founder and chief executive, does acknowledge there are problems in not having a newsroom, specifically: "... the difficulties of building a team, training staff and establishing a brand."¹⁰ However he explained that Hancock is not intending to establish newsrooms, that he believes local news should be embedded in its area, and written and published on patch, and if he set up newsrooms they would have to be regional which would go against what he was trying to achieve with local news.

There are many ways of working in journalism and the media that can be easily facilitated without a
gust 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/28/media-blitz-to-get-workers-back-to-offices-amid-pandemic>

³ See Tobitt, C (2021) "Reach closed most of its newsrooms ..." <https://pressgazette.co.uk/most-reach-journalists-work-home-after-covid-19-mail-online-prepares-return-newsroom/>

⁴ <https://www.prolificnorth.co.uk/news/publishing-news/2020/06/jpimedia-close-11-local-offices>

⁵ Martin, R (2020) "BBC to close remaining local radio district offices." <https://radiotoday.co.uk/2020/05/bbc-to-close-remaining-local-radio-district-offices/> The BBC's official announcement can be found here: www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-52543152

⁶ See Linford, P (2019) "100 jobs at risk and studios set to close in huge local radio shake-up" www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2019/news/100-jobs-at-risk-and-studios-set-to-close-in-huge-local-radio-shake-up/

⁷ See <https://medium.com/behind-local-news-uk/jpimedia-to-launch-in-8-new-cities-as-part-of-digital-expansion-672e1c33655f>

⁸ <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/nub-news-platform-profile/>

⁹ More at www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2021/news/former-regional-daily-editor-to-take-charge-of-hyperlocal-network/

¹⁰ Personal communication with Mike Sassi, Honorary Visiting Professor Nottingham Trent University. 22 June 2021

newsroom or studio complex. Podcasting, for example, can be produced in makeshift home facilities at minimal cost. Most newsgathering technologies are cheap and portable. Radio stations can be run from a spare bedroom with remote input from their news teams, indeed that has been happening during lockdown with one East Midlands community radio station, Siren Radio, based at the University of Lincoln, winning a Radio Television Digital News Association Regional (International) Edward R Murrow Award for News Documentary whilst doing so.¹¹ Meanwhile a new online radio station, believed to be the first UK station established without any central studio facility, was launched in February 2021.¹²

Immersed in the community

In terms of journalism's important democratic role, those reporters stationed in areas which do not have a newsroom per se have no choice but to be immersed in the communities they serve. These 'backpack journalists' may be better able to serve their communities, build relationships, encourage a greater range of voices, and thus enhance democracy, particularly at the local level.

But most journalists feel they benefit from working physically alongside colleagues, that the environment is conducive to generating and developing ideas, sharing expertise on background, context, and contacts. And some predict that journalism will be the poorer for the closures of newsrooms.¹³

Nottingham Trent University benefits from a close partnership with the city's local television station, Notts TV. They won the most recent contract to host Nottinghamshire's Local Democracy Reporters. When the station advertised for the posts, they emphasised not just their city centre location but also the working environment; a workstation, a phone, excellent IT services, their own on-site café. The attraction of being able to work in a newsroom and get a coffee with colleagues, things we once could take for granted, were part of the package that enticed the three successful candidates. Journalists are social creatures and like to work in newsrooms.

The implications for journalism education are similarly contradictory and complex. No matter what we tell our students about replicating industry practice, that professional practice will be increasingly hybrid, they want to work together face to face and in-person. Having no newsrooms could make journalism programmes a less popular study option, and we know the student choice of institution is often at least partly influenced by the facilities provided as part of their course.

But in accepting that many future journalists will have to be more agile, remote and mobile, workers, we are better able to prepare students for that future. Rather than fetishizing the facilities we may be able to focus more on the journalism praxis; the editorial processes, ethical decision-making, the theoretical analysis of journalism. We could increase the emphasis on developing the students' confidence, resilience, their self-motivation, prepare them to be flexible and innovative in their working, to be more creative practitioners and entrepreneurial freelancers, to develop and nurture good contacts and engagement with the community/ies they serve.

Newsrooms - ultimate, informal training

Newsrooms are the ultimate, informal, training environment. Those of us who remember our early careers in journalism will remember how we learned from the experienced hacks we worked alongside. The newsroom culture could be brutal, it could be sexist, but you knew there were seasoned journalism on hand from whom you could learn, who would mentor you. Student journalists learn constantly from those around them. It's one of the reasons why we work so hard to place our students in their newsrooms. They're fabulous for building your network, generating and developing your ideas, and learning your trade.

As those local newsrooms disappear, we know placements can continue remotely and we know there will be other opportunities elsewhere, but there will be fewer of them. If we want our students to work alongside professional journalists, and newsrooms are disappearing, then we should be inviting those professional journalists to come and work in our newsrooms alongside our students. We should develop the nature of our collaboration with industry partners as their working environment changes.

11 Personal communication with Andrew David, Siren Radio's Managing Editor, September 2021.

12 See <https://www.abc.org/trends/how-we-built-it-boom-radios-home-broadcasting-setup/7326.article>

13 See Blackhurst, C (2021) <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/death-of-newsroom-means-end-of-journalism/>

In 2014 I took a research trip to the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University, in the US. News organisations base themselves within the School, including Arizona PBS and the Society of American Business Editors and Writers. Whilst most UK journalism education providers do not have the same resources as the Cronkite School, the advantages of integrating the professional with the educational environment could be explored. At least one university has already welcomed BBC local radio onto their campus and more will follow. But whilst some of the groundwork may have been done already, the pre-pandemic financial pressures along with the additional strains faced over the last 18 months have accelerated thinking and this seems to be the time to look at these collaborations and consider them as part of our reality in journalism education in the UK. Although the shrinking and disappearing newsrooms are a challenge we may, by offering our support to professional journalists and news organisations, provide an enhanced learning experience for our students.

The global pandemic has forced the speed and direction of change, and we are already finding that large newsrooms, and associated studio complexes where relevant, do not fulfil the same functions they once did.

Developments in technology have meant that an entire news operation, in terms of newsgathering and news delivery for both broadcast and non-broadcast organisations, can work remotely with fewer in-situ facilities needed.

With more journalists working from home or on the road, rather than being based in a newsroom, we all are considering the challenges and exploring the opportunities. We want to mirror current professional practice so we can produce ready-made practitioners, but also anticipate the unpredictable future of the news industries and prepare our students as best we can for that uncertain future. Where there is room, if we are able to welcome professional journalists into our facilities and offer them a space to work, we can do so in exchange for some level of formal or informal mentoring. In this way we can offer students the opportunity to work alongside professional journalists on a regular basis and together with our industry partners strengthen the sustainability of local news.