

# Post Brexit, post pandemic: reframing public administration teaching for journalism students

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## Introduction

**Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic are Public Administration stories of historic significance. They have served as a trenchant reminder of the importance of this core element of the journalism curriculum.**

As long as the purposes of journalism continues to include the duties to inform audiences of issues that affect them (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007), to hold power to account (Thurman at al., 2012) and to get the best obtainable version of the truth (Bernstein, quoted in Teicholz, 2019), then Public Administration will remain an essential part of journalism education.

Despite this, the subject is coming under pressure on journalism courses in higher education in the UK. On some courses, there is a trend to cut the number of credits devoted to Public Administration or make it an optional module or worse, to cut it from the curriculum completely. Elsewhere, whilst some do first-class work, others deliver the module in broadly the same fashion that it was delivered 35 years ago.

It is time to reassert the critical importance of Public Administration education for journalism students and, in the wake of both Brexit and the pandemic, reshape the way in which it is taught.

The following observations and proposals draw on 26 years of reporting public administration stories, 13 years of teaching the topic and seven years as an accreditation inspector and external examiner, scrutinising the documentation of courses across the UK, accredited by all three of the accrediting bodies and none, and upon conversations with staff and students to whom I offer my sincere thanks.

## The context

Public Administration is one of the very oldest parts of the journalism curriculum. A form of Public Administration, then labelled Politics, was part of the very first short-lived university course in 1919. When industry training was first formalised under the National Council for the Training of Journalists in 1951, Public Administration was a compulsory part of the curriculum for trainees. As journalism training and education transitioned to higher education, a process that began tentatively in 1970 before gathering pace in the 1990s, Public Administration was a part of the curriculum that effortlessly made the switch to academia.

This century, journalism education in the United Kingdom has undergone substantial further change, driven both by transformations within industry as well as within higher education itself. Courses have multiplied and contracted. They have moved from single to multiplatform teaching. Content has been significantly revised. Academics have embraced new approaches to pedagogy while simultaneously semesterising or desemesterising according to prevailing academic fashion.

Amidst this welter of change, academics have had relatively little time to reflect on Public Administration modules. The existence of Government, at least, has been one mercifully unchanging constant in this convulsing landscape. Furthermore, for many courses, the Public Administration element of the curriculum

and often its assessments have been determined by the accrediting bodies. None of these factors mean academics should not reflect deeply about this important part of the curriculum, its objectives and its delivery.

## The issues

While there are some excellent Public Administration lecturers inspiring students, there are three areas of concern.

The first, highlighted by the research into Public Administration pedagogy, is students' reluctance to embrace the topic and their struggles in mastering it.

Ingham (2011, p4) argues students find the subject "dry and certainly not sexy or appealing." Clark and Jones (2017, p224) refer to the "dreaded module" with a "daunting" syllabus that is "more difficult than that other great journalistic leveller, learning shorthand." In a competitive marketplace, where student attainment and satisfaction are important measurements of a course's success, this is a matter of concern.

To boost engagement and attainment, Ingham (2011) argues the value of reflective, interrogative blogs while Clark and Jones (2017) favour lecturer enthusiasm, careful building block elements, effective hooks, debates in seminars and a focus on tutorials. Nevertheless, the core problem they highlight, that Public Administration is a module that students find dull and difficult, remains. The correct response to this is to ask: "So how are we teaching this wrong?"

Unfortunately, the response, on a minority of courses, has merely been to minimise the problem by cutting the number of credits devoted to Public Administration or making the topic optional or worse erasing it from the curriculum completely. I have been told: "We want to only teach the sexy stuff", "It's politics, it's boring", "Students don't like it", "It's not what students want to study."

The problem has been compounded by the rebranding of Public Administration as Public Affairs. In the last two years, three otherwise interesting, non-accredited courses have informed me that they teach Public Affairs because they teach the definition of the public interest and the Freedom of Information Act. This is a fundamental misunderstanding.

Whatever we may choose to call the topic for student consumption – and there are some innovative module names out there - it is essential that we as academics revert, between ourselves, to calling a spade, a spade. This paper therefore deliberately refers to Public Administration.

This minority trend to squeeze, optionalise or cut Public Administration is disturbing. It has reached a point where it is important to push back and reassert the fundamental importance of Public Administration to the curriculum. But we need to go further.

The majority continue to teach Public Administration and to give it due weight. The common module size is 20 credits with some delivering 30 credits. However, while there is some innovative practice, the teaching schedules and assessments are too often indistinguishable, bar the addition of devolution, from those I was taught as a student at City University 35 years ago.

Whilst there are some good reasons for a degree of continuity, there are poor reasons as well. As the UK progresses into what is hopefully the final phase of the pandemic and settles down into its Brexit future, the very least that both academics and the accrediting bodies should be asking about Public Administration is: are we getting it right?

Any review of Public Administration teaching needs to be mindful not just of the quality of student learning but also of the implications that major industry changes have had for Public Administration reporting. These are:

1. **Digital Newsgathering:** A vast amount of official documentation is now available at just a few clicks of a mouse, opening up rich seams for newsgathering that were not available as easily 35 years ago. Students need to be taught how to extract stories from such documentation, a task that should be pursued in both Public Administration and Newswriting classes.
2. **The Digital Contact:** Where once journalists formed contacts through face to face meetings, social media has provided valuable opportunities to form useful contacts online. Students need learn about digital contacts in Newsgathering classes and to be encouraged to start building their digital contacts, so useful for Public Administration stories, from the start of their studies.
3. **Audience engagement:** News organisations face stiff competition for the attention of their audi-

ences, especially the young. This underlines the importance of powerful, effective storytelling. Yet too often, students faced with a Public Administration story, revert to stiff, stilted formal language. The same problem exists in their court reporting. In both Newswriting and Public Administration classes, students need to be taught how to deliver Public Administration stories in a compelling manner that focuses on what matters. If they bore their audiences, they fail their audiences.

## Reframing public administration modules

Let us start with the shared objective of both courses and accrediting bodies: to produce graduates who can work as competent junior journalists.

The vast majority of courses, regardless of platform, prepare graduates for general news.

There is a minority suite of specialist courses, of which sport is pre-eminent. It is possible, especially for sport, to deliver a Public Administration module tailored entirely to that specialism. However, the majority of institutions that teach both general news and specialist journalism, deliver Public Administration as a shared module so this paper will continue to focus on a general news objective, but with periodic sport twists.

Having established the core objective – to produce graduates who can work as competent junior journalists – the next question to ask is how should a Public Administration module contribute to that objective?

This is where the reframing begins. The primary objective of a Public Administration module is emphatically not to teach students either politics or structures of power. Journalism courses are not here to train future civil servants or politicians, even though there are notable examples, not least the current Prime Minister Boris Johnson, of journalists subsequently moving into politics.

The primary objective of the module should be to produce specialists in stories: junior journalists who will be able report the major Public Administration related stories that employers and audiences want.

The module is actually the students' gateway to some of the biggest stories of the day, of the week or of their careers. It is an opportunity to showcase superb journalism and multi-task on learning outcomes, examining powerful writing and effective packages, explainers and documentary techniques. When Public Administration is taught through the prism of compelling stories and first-class journalism, student engagement is not a problem.

In order to ensure the module achieves the objective of teaching effective Public Administration related storytelling, we then need to ask:

What are the major Public Administration related stories that employers and audiences will want and need?

What knowledge and skills do students therefore need to learn?

And finally, how much can be squeezed into one module and what might have to go elsewhere?

## The stories

The choice of stories is crucial. These should shape teaching schedules and assessments. The stories will serve as the principle hook that Clark & Jones (2017, p229) describe as “phenomenally important” when it comes to securing engagement.

The stories have two other important functions. They demonstrate to students the profound relevance of what they are studying and show them exactly how journalists navigate the Public Administration maze to get front page or top-of-the-bulletin stories.

In choosing the stories, module tutors therefore need to apply to their teaching schedules the concepts of news values and public interest that we teach elsewhere in the curriculum.

The focus should be on profound Public Administration-related dilemmas or major failures - stories that would lead the news not simply provide a nib or mid-bulletin presenter read. The more compelling the story, the more engaged the students will be. The more engaged they are, the better they will learn.

There are broadly two categories of major Public Administration story:

First there are the perennials, most notably those involving the emergency services. There is a utilitarian

argument to be made, from an industry perspective, to open every Public Administration module with the police, fire and ambulance services. Although tempting, it doesn't work from a pedagogic basis. Core building blocks need to be put in place first but it underlines the importance of these services. Police are often taught. Fire and ambulance much less. Students need to understand all three.

The other important type of perennial stories are those involving abuse, neglect, mal practice or poor practice, particularly but not exclusively in the fields of child protection, adult social care and health care. These are stories of immense public interest that go to the heart of the journalistic responsibility to hold power to account. These are stories journalists never forget reporting. It is critical that student journalists are taught how to do these properly.

The second category of major Public Administration stories are the long-term stories and dilemmas, issues that are likely to run for at least the opening decade of our graduates' careers. Most will be still running when our graduates retire.

Here tutors have to make some tough, strategic decisions, driven by news values and module size. It is not possible to teach everything. There is also the latitude to play to staff and students' strengths and interests.

The pool of stories to choose from includes the future of the NHS, educational attainment, poverty, provision of housing, adult social care, effectiveness of the justice system, immigration, the monarchy, foreign policy & defence challenges. Colleagues will have their own suggestions.

Two important contenders for inclusion are climate change and the possible break-up of the United Kingdom.

Climate change is the perfect vehicle for a case study in policy-making whilst also providing the valuable opportunity to demonstrate methods and structures of international co-operation. At least one course currently delivers this as a themed newsday. Properly prepared, that is a valuable approach.

The break-up of the UK may not happen but there is cross party consensus, at the highest level, that there is a serious risk that it might. The current construct of the UK is barely 100 years old and it is not a given that it will continue. Post Brexit, the strains are particularly acute. Should Scotland go, rupturing a union that has lasted more than 300 years, the ramifications will be far deeper than Brexit. Should Northern Ireland go, there will be bloodshed.

What is certain is that the debate about the future path of devolution, like that of climate change, will run through our graduates' careers. For their audience's sake, they need to understand both.

Inevitably it is not possible to teach everything. There will hard choices to make about what to leave out. Some of the teaching schedules that cross my desk devote an entire week's worth of learning, plus an essay topic, to House of Lords reform. Why? How often do we expect our junior journalists to report House of Lords reform? I was a lobby correspondent for 13 years, I reported the only substantive reform of the House of Lords during our lifetimes, and even I didn't report the House of Lords that much.

This is not to say the House of Lords should not be taught. Of course it should but, in an already brimming module, it is a tight 20 minutes during a building block session on the UK Parliament. Students need to know what the House of Lords does, how (occasionally) to use it, why it is a democratic nonsense and why reform is so glacially slow. Having established those important foundations, we can leave the rest to continuous professional development.

This now opens up a hole in the teaching schedule that could be devoted to a Public Administration story which junior journalists are far more likely to report. One obvious candidate might be flooding. Who is responsible for flood defences? Who pays for them? How do public policy decisions exacerbate and mitigate flooding? How do the emergency services, local authorities and government agencies work together during flooding? What is the role of governments, parliaments and councils in supporting those affected by flooding?

From the perspective of an editor, which junior journalist is of more use to the audience: the one who knows how to report flooding or the one who can write features about House of Lords reform?

## Knowledge and skills

Having established the stories, we then need to identify the knowledge and skills students need to report those stories effectively.

There are four: Structures of power. Context. The ability to gut official documents. Critical analysis.

## Structures of power

Knowledge of structures of power is essential for effective reporting. Students need to know where to direct their questions, who holds information and where power lies.

Inevitably there will be building block sessions on core structures that cut across multiple story areas. These typically include UK Government and Parliament and local government.

Not all courses based in England focus as strongly as they should on devolution. I have on several occasions been told: “Devolution doesn’t apply to our students, we’re in England.” Even if we put aside the possible break-up of the UK, this approach fails to appreciate the sheer impact of devolution on people’s lives. This has been graphically demonstrated by the pandemic when four different administrations were enforcing four different sets of rules in four different parts of the UK. Journalists who failed to understand those distinctions would have fundamentally failed their audiences. Everyone needs to teach devolution.

Some courses do not teach the structures of public services. This is a mistake. Public services generate many stories that audiences both want and need. To report those stories effectively, students need to know where power lies within those services, how it is held to account, how the service is delivered, how is it funded, who monitors standards and who handles complaints. They must also understand that structures frequently change.

Finally, students need to join up the dots. Governments, watchdogs, local authorities and public services do not operate as silos. Major stories often involve multiple organisations and institutions. As the award-winning health journalist Shaun Lintern said: “You have got to know the organisations and you have got to know how they fit in with each other” (European Health Journalism, undated).

Let us take a child protection failure, one of those tragic perennials of journalism. There is a set list of individuals and organisations who reporters should contact when there is a dead child in the morgue. Each one could generate fresh information and important follow-ups.

On mainland Britain these will include:

The most senior politicians with executive power on the relevant council and the most senior councillors with scrutiny or opposition roles.

The council’s director of children’s services. Plus, if possible, the social workers monitoring the child. Failing that, the social workers’ representative body.

The child protection standards watchdog. Reporters should check that watchdog’s previous reports on the council. Is this one struggling to deliver good levels of child protection or one with glowing previous reports?

Journalists need to repeat the process for the relevant police force, looking for the most senior officer, most senior politicians with oversight and the standards watchdog.

They should then repeat for relevant NHS bodies and school if they are involved in the story.

Nationally, dependent on location, journalists should be contacting:

- The relevant local MP/MSP/MS;
- The relevant national government minister;
- The opposition shadow minister ;
- The relevant national parliamentary committee.

This is a list that can be learned by rote, very much a form of learning needed to pass the National Council for the Training of Journalists’ public affairs examinations as Clark and Jones (2017) eloquently outline but rote learning is shallow learning.

It is far more effective to teach recurring public administration issues through the prism of actual stories, examining what goes wrong and demonstrating how journalists have used the structures to report the story and how they have developed new angles and follow-ups.

In the case of child protection, there are, sadly, plenty of stories to choose from. The death of Peter Connelly, better known as Baby P, is particularly useful, not least because the reforms needed to prevent his death had already been identified and supposedly implemented following the Laming report (2003) into the death of Victoria Climbié, a case so horrific that it led to UK-wide rethink on child protection strategies.

Students are left aghast at the scale of failures, made all the worse by the final realisation that the council which failed Baby P was the same one which had failed little Victoria. It is not a story that students forget.

In their mounting disbelief, they are engaged, gripped by the unfolding saga and following the journalists through the maze of local and national government, police and NHS structures as news organisations reported this unfolding major story. In process the students learn how to join the dots. They are therefore better prepared for when they too will have to report a child protection failure.

For a guide to the Baby P story, please refer to Chapter 6 Child Protection in Reporting Power (Ironsides, 2020) free download here: <https://bjtc.org.uk/e-publications>

## Context

Next students need context. Structures without context are meaningless.

Context may be subject specific: for example, why will child protection structures always sometimes fail? Context can involve demographics, so important to housing, planning, the NHS, education, adult social care and more.

Context can involve history. The debates about the future of devolution or the NHS or the unfolding ramifications of Brexit cannot be understood without mastering the past. The background to these are explained in Chapters 2-4, Chapter 10 and Chapter 14 in Reporting Power (Ironsides, 2020) free download here: <https://bjtc.org.uk/e-publications>

And crucially, context includes funding. Students need to understand not just the structure of budgets but their context. They should be taught the ramifications of the global economic crash of 2008 and the consequences of spending decisions that followed. Why? Because the stories generated over the last decade from the spending decisions taken in the wake of the banking crash provide the most useful potential indicator of the stories likely to be generated over the coming decade as a result of the economic shock of the pandemic. The background to budgets, with an examination of the impact of both the global crash and the pandemic, can be found in Chapter 12 in Reporting Power (Ironsides, 2020) free download here: <https://bjtc.org.uk/e-publications>

A case study helps underline the importance of spending decisions. Mindful of students' classes on court reporting and the value of multi-tasking on learning outcomes, it is useful to take the courts of England & Wales as a case study in government spending decisions. It is a topic that can be taught either in a Public Administration module or a Law module. The tale of the strains on the judicial system is a powerful story that has led to award-winning journalism (Mayhew, 2019).

Before the pandemic struck, the Law Society (2019) was warning that the criminal justice system was "at absolute breaking point," the former President of the Supreme Court Lord Neuberger predicted a breakdown in the rule of law if politicians didn't change course (Scottish Legal News, 2019) while in his annual report the head of the police standards watchdog, Sir Tom Winsor warned the wider criminal justice system was both "dysfunctional and defective" (HMICFRS, 2019, p13). The pandemic has only exacerbated matters.

Understanding the context of the resourcing of courts will help student journalists make sense of some of the events they will witness in court. It is also a source of stories for them. The problems are likely to take years to reverse. The background to the courts crisis is explained in Chapter 13 in Reporting Power (Ironsides, 2020) free download here: <https://bjtc.org.uk/e-publications>

## The ability to gut official documents

One great advantage of the digital era is the amount of official documentation that is now readily available online. These are an immense source of stories. The ability to gut official documents is an important one to be taught in both Public Administration and Newswriting classes. It requires an understanding of both structures and context and is best taught through the prism of stories.

It is important to start with straightforward material. Just as it is a mistake to launch students' direct engagement with public administration structures by taking them, unprepared, to a potentially dry and unintelligible council meeting, so too should students not initially be handed a particularly jargon-ridden document.

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham (Jay, 2014) is a useful starting point. Students should have the story explained and can look at The Times' journalism on the topic. Then

they can turn to the Jay report. The pdf is 159 pages long. Ask students to write a short news story from the report. Direct them first to the table of contents and ask them where they should focus their attention, given the clock is ticking to deadline. The answer is the crisp Executive Summary, just two pages long. It's all they need. Instruct them to only choose quotes that are written in plain English that they and their readers would understand.

From there, students can progress, through the prism of powerful stories, to more complex documents. All the examples below have been successfully tackled by Level 4 students in Semester 1.

The Hillsborough Football Disaster provides the tragic prism through which students can dissect four parliamentary statements by Home Secretaries (Hurd 1989, Waddington 1990, Straw 1998, May 2016), the Taylor report (1990), the Culture Secretary Andy Burnham's address at Anfield on the 20th anniversary of the disaster (LFC-TV, 2009) and the Hillsborough Independent Panel report (2012).

The Mid-Staffs Hospital scandal can be examined first through the prism of campaigners' websites and powerful journalism and then, once students have grasped the issues, through watchdog reports, parliamentary statements and the Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry report of 2013. Not all sources have to be text-based. The video of the press conference by Inquiry chair Robert Francis (Hayes Collins Media, 2013) provides a valuable test of students' ability to take effective notes and pick key quotes whilst also underlining the importance of punctuality. Francis doesn't wait for latecomers.

The dry topic of council finance can be enlivened, especially for sports journalism students, by the tale of the Cobblers' missing millions, a story of a multi-million pound loan a council made to a football club. Most of the money subsequently vanished, leaving a stadium incomplete, fans furious and plans to regenerate a rundown area of Northampton in tatters. Having covered the basics, read the investigative journalism by BBC journalists Matt Precey and Julian Sturdy (BBC, 2018), sports journalism students have then plunged with relish on a KPMG (undated) council audit report to spot where things went wrong from the council perspective.

Grenfell is a powerful conduit through which to teach housing. Students who have watched the video obtained by Sky News (2017) of firefighters' first glimpse of the blazing Grenfell Tower and clips from the press conference held by the bereaved (BBC, 2019) and who have examined the Scottish response to the Irvine fire of 1999 and the English response to the Lakanal fire of 2009, will then prove adept at gutting Building A Safer Future: The Independent Review of Building Regulations & Fire Safety (Hackitt, 2018) and subsequent Government statements on housing.

## Critical analysis

As students recognise the assorted roles and responsibilities of Public Administration bodies, absorb the context and learn to gut official sources, they should also develop their skills of critical analysis. Does a politician's assertion actually stand scrutiny? If a watchdog has given an organisation at the centre of a scandal a good report does that mean the scandal is a one-off failing or that the watchdog is a poor watchdog?

This critical analysis should be demonstrated both in class discussion and within assessments. These tend to be essays or examinations, although some courses have commendable practical portfolios. Those assessing through essays tend to focus on themes such as Prime Ministerial powers, the powers of the legislature or diversity in representation, all commendable subjects.

It is worth considering, however, asking students to analyse the responses of governments, parliaments and public services to specific major Public Administration dilemmas or failures such as those listed above. In order to deliver, students would need to understand structures and context. In preparation for the essay, they should read their textbooks and then the extensive journalism on the topic in question. However, in the essay itself, students should only be permitted to quote from official documents that journalists would use such as inquiry reports, parliamentary transcripts, audit reports and press releases.

An essay on Prime Ministerial power should perhaps focus on the prorogation of Parliament in autumn 2019. Students should be confined to quoting from the Supreme Court judgment that this was unlawful, the many lively Hansard exchanges, think-tank commentaries, the Conservative Party manifesto of 2019 and subsequent review of the judicial review process led by the Ministry of Justice.

The learning outcomes of such essays should require students to demonstrate an understanding of structures, the ability to gut official sources and the ability to critically analyse those sources.

## Conclusion

Public Administration should not be a problem module. It is a module that general news journalists and indeed sports journalists need to master to ensure that they can properly tell the powerful Public Administration related stories that audiences and employers want and need.

To be most effective, it should be taught through the prism of stories. Engaged students can then see how journalists use Public Administration structures, they can absorb context and become skilled in dissecting official sources. This will endow them with skills needed to tell Public Administration stories effectively. As ITV Wales' Programme & Digital Editor Louise Elliott (2021) tweeted: "General news reporters are specialists. They cover anything, anywhere at any time. That is a superpower." An effective knowledge of how to turn Public Administration events into compelling stories is part of that superpower. Equipping students with that knowledge is a prime duty of journalism courses.

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