

*The Use of Digital Means in the Teaching and Learning of  
Multiplatform and Social Media News Reporting*

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**Abstract**

The debate promoted decades ago on the use of the ICT as a key factor for the learning processes in the university teaching, together with the advancements in the journalistic field support this paper approach (Scott, 2002). The main aim is to determine the value of using social media when training journalism students on the specific aptitudes that are being currently demanded by the media companies. In the light of these circumstances, this paper studies how online journalism and communication related subjects are dealing with these current instructional challenges. It provides data of an innovation education project aimed at developing Spanish and Brazil journalism students' reporting skills via the use of social media and multiplatform news coverage. This project carried out jointly by the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) in Spain and the Mato Grosso do Sul Federal University (UFMS) in Brazil develops the competences required to create multimedia features and social media reporting through cooperation between online journalism students from both universities.

Keywords: Journalism, ICT, innovation, social media, convergence

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## **1. Multiplatform professional and teaching environments**

Over recent years, journalism has witnessed the crumbling of many of the traditional principles upon which the profession was based. The widespread deployment and use of the 2.0 tools and social media have provided citizens with simple means of creating and disseminating news content, which in turn has enabled a greater degree of audience participation and put an end to the media's monopoly over the news discourse.

The consolidation of new journalistic practices thus is the main challenge currently being faced by media companies in their attempts to innovate and redefine their business models in the 21st century. This is changing the manner in which newsrooms are structured and the work they perform, which is giving rise to a higher degree of cooperation between employees, more flexible and versatile job profiles, and a more-balanced relationship between media platforms and professionals who work for different divisions. These adjustments have allowed online media, platforms and newsrooms to shed their prior second-rank status and compete more successfully with their more traditional counterparts.

These changes the sector has undergone and continue to undergo have sparked a debate concerning the skills the media sector now expects entrance-level employees to have and, by extension, the type of formal and practical training universities should be offering their communications students. The university sphere cannot afford to remain on the margins of these large-scale changes and a key question has emerged from this discussion: given the instrumental as well as a pedagogical role they play in the classroom, what is the best strategy for incorporating digital tools into courses meant to prepare students to be versatile multimedia communicators?

For decades, universities themselves have been undergoing a structural transformation and experiencing a gradual change in the culture of learning. As analysed in this paper, this has prompted university instructors to rethink teaching methodologies, orienting their practice towards fostering greater student participation and effort, as well as greater interaction between students and faculty. This paper thus aims to contribute to current debate on innovative teaching methods being applied in recently introduced courses related to internet-based journalism that were added to university communications studies curricula as part of the process of adaptation to European Higher Education Area (EHEA) standards. The analysis it contains draws on the results of surveys the authors conducted with students enrolled in these courses during the academic years subsequent to their introduction into a specific communications curriculum and data relative to their classroom interaction and dialogue with students.

This reflection on teaching innovation in the areas of communication and journalism is based on the premise that digital tools and social media can be effectively used by university communications instructors, especially in the context of courses focusing on Internet-based journalism practices, by virtue of their utility in hands-on assignments that immerse students in situations that closely resemble or replicate the real daily experience of multitasking and multimedia communications professionals working in the sector today. Educational experiences of this type are particularly valuable in the light of multimedia, media and journalistic convergence, a complicated process that has affected various aspects of journalism from the way that

content is being produced as a result of digitisation to the expanding array of distribution platforms (press, radio, television, online editions of news publications and social media) now available to journalists.

## **2. Professional and teaching innovation in the field of Journalism**

As a result of the reform prompted by the need to adapt to the European Higher Education Area, degree course syllabuses developed since 2010 in Spanish Communications Faculties have been based on a broad-ranging analysis of degree-level content taught in both Spanish and European universities. The result was a *White Paper on Communications Degrees* (Aneca, 2004), which defined the principal professional profiles established for each degree. One of the most important changes included in this white paper was the specific identification of the professional opportunities offered by the new online media, the inclusion of which was a *de facto* declaration of the need to take such aspects into account in all new degree syllabuses, since this field was hardly touched upon at all in existing study programmes.

The result of this process of reflection was the incorporation of specific subjects designed to develop competences in this area in all Communications and Media degree syllabuses from 2010/2011 onwards. While in former degrees taught at the UPV/EHU, the study of online media was limited to one optional subject in the Journalism degree course and one free-choice subject on the Virtual Campus, in the new degree courses, the compulsory 2nd year subject entitled Online Journalism and Reporting establishes the basics of Internet-based communications, an area further developed later on in each individual degree through a number of specific subjects: in the case of Journalism, these subjects are *Multimedia editing and production* and *Social and participatory journalism on the Internet*, in Publicity and Public Relations it is *Multimedia production in Advertising* and in Audiovisual Communications they are *Graphic design and multimedia environments* and *The Internet and cultural industries*. In addition to these changes, the subject matter was also mainstreamed and included across the board in all teaching guides.

Specifically, Journalism and Communication university teaching focuses currently on the work in the above referred professional multiplatform and social media environment, and relates to the development of basic aptitudes, such as news writing and reporting, as well as to transversal ones, such as cooperative work. Even if the educators' efforts to prepare students to practice online journalism have centered mainly on the hypertextual, multimedia, and interactive aspects of online media (Deuze, 2001; Lowrey, Tumber 2005), in order to remain competitive academic journalism programs tend to address more and more media convergence and to include social media reporting in their curricula.

Online Journalism Reporting subject thus aims to develop students' capacity for creativity and innovation, as well as their ability to interact with both their public and their sources. It also aims to foster the skills required for composing messages specially adapted to the characteristics and possibilities of the online environment. In other words, it aims to teach students how to produce messages in real time and work in a collaborative manner to develop multiplatform projects. From a more general perspective, the subject aims to offer students the resources they need to 'learn how to learn' about the web culture, and ensure that they become familiarised with the media

ecosystem of the Internet. Consequently, the learning outcomes are described in the syllabus as the ability to 'plan and produce messages in accordance with the specific characteristics of the language of online journalism (hypertextuality, multimodality and interactivity) and the conventions, principles and narrative functions of Internet-based journalistic genres'.

Since the establishment of Online Journalism Reporting, faculty have introduced a number of new techniques with the aim of rendering the subject more competitive (Fernandes & Larrondo, 2015). In other words, the aim is to improve the quality of the teaching provided, ensuring that the classroom activities carried out are as similar as possible to real professional practice, and the capacities developed are as similar as possible to those required by digital editorial departments.

The subject aims to introduce students to the routines of online journalism, placing particular emphasis on the production of high-quality contents that make the best use possible of the characteristics of Internet-based news discourse (hypertextuality, multimodality and interactivity). It therefore combines conceptual knowledge with the practical use of tools that enable students not only to construct and manage websites, but also to participate on the social media and enter into a new relationship with their audiences. In short, it is an innovative subject that aims to move beyond mere technological fads and strives to instill in students professional values such as responsibility, teamwork, self-sufficiency and empathy with online audiences.

The subject encompasses 60 teaching hours, of which 32 are lectures and 28 practical classroom sessions (2 hours a week). Practical sessions are held in the multimedia rooms of the Social and Communication Sciences Faculty, meaning that students use on-site facilities for this part of their course.

The practical syllabus includes students setting up a blog as a support instrument for their activities. The blog is used for publishing online news items, multimedia features and dialogue-based online journalistic content. Students' other tasks include disseminating their practical activities over the social media. Students work in groups of between 4 and 5, using the cooperative practical learning methodology.

The teaching practices applied in the online journalism course evaluated during this research (Online Journalism Reporting) have focused on the use of blogs as interactive publication platforms and project-based learning (PBL) techniques. All of the courses covered by this study have required students to create and maintain blogs that have served to stimulate interaction and dialogue between them and their instructors. Each blog has functioned as a media outlet offering specific sections that students working individually and in groups have constantly updated with hypermedia news items, feature stories, reports, analytical pieces and other forms of online content. Format-specific characteristics of blogs that make them ideal for use in this type of course include:

- User-friendly publishing mechanisms and intuitive interfaces
- Hypermedia features that allow students to practice inserting hypertext links and experiment with a range of media formats (video, audio, text, image, etc.)
- Support for collaborative news production conducted from any location via a wide array of devices employed by students working on or off campus.

- Inclusion of mechanisms for stimulating interactivity in the form of user comments and feedback from instructors and peers.
- Capacity to enhance the visibility of student projects and showcase online portfolios useful to graduates entering the job market.

In addition to creating and maintaining a blog, students enrolled in the mandatory online journalism courses analysed are also required to carry out assignments involving the use of social media platforms (YouTube, Twitter and Facebook). The experience of establishing a social media presence allows students to develop their individual media brands by promoting blog content via social media platforms. Using social media in assignments related to online journalism stimulates students to be more autonomous and creative in performing other tasks required in Internet communications such as tracking down and establishing direct contact with official sources.

The inclusion of all of these resources in coursework is meant to deepen students' sense of initiative and responsibility. Familiarising themselves with these tools helps future professionals develop competences considered essential in journalism today such the ability to engage in team work and the habit of applying a 'learning-to-learn' approach to mastering new techniques in their field.

Given the broad panorama of changes in the social, professional and educational fields outlined above, this study aims to describe a specific educational innovation proposal related to online journalism and the dissemination of 2.0 and multiplatform news content. In the following sections, we argue that educational innovation has become a key concept, particularly in relation to the teaching of communications and journalism in today's new technological environments.

### **3. Innovation in Education through cooperative learning**

As Messersmith (2015: 219) points out, facilitating meaningful interaction amongst students is a significant challenge of teaching in the online environment. This interaction seems especially interesting in the teaching of abilities related to communication. According to the same author, virtual teams are increasingly becoming a part of the organizational landscape, capitalizing on diversity and resources that exist across locations; research suggests virtual teams can even outperform co-located teams.

These educational trends have given rise to increasingly collaborative learning environments in which technological issues are afforded ever greater importance. The university student body is mainly made up of young people or 'digital natives' who assimilate technology with ease. Moreover, it is important to note that the social media form an integral part of these young people's lives. Indeed, it could be said that the relationship between young people and new technological tools poses a major challenge for educators, particularly in the field of Communications and Journalism (Larrondo & Meso, 2013).

When using the social media in their teaching practice, university faculty from the field of Journalism strive to find a teaching method that takes into account the current demands of the profession. In other words, they seek to foster the development of the

skills and capacities that will be required by companies of their students once they graduate. The teaching innovations promoted by the *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA) have aroused a specific interest among teaching staff in focusing on those aspects that students should bear in mind when working in their chosen profession. In this sense, in addition to ensuring the educational qualities necessary to ensure effective, useful classes, faculty should also strive to develop qualities closely related to those demanded by the industry. The use of modern interaction technologies also seeks to increase motivation among students, since the realisation that what they do in class is similar to what they will be expected to do in the workplace will encourage a greater degree of engagement (Fanjul & González, 2010).

Networking is an activity that needs to be internalised; it should form part of professionals' everyday lives, particularly in the case of those choosing careers in the communications and online journalism fields. The term Web 2.0 or Social Web was coined in 2004 by Tim O'Reilly to refer to a second generation of webs based on user communications and a special range of services, such as social networking sites, blogs and wikis, which foster collaboration and the fast exchange of information between users. After just over a decade, the Social Web has proven itself to be something more than a passing fad, demonstrating its capacity to change both the form and the content of the traditional mass media paradigm.

The trend shift which occurred in Europe as the result of the development of a common higher education area prompted the setting up of new contact points between faculty and students that go beyond the tangibility of the classroom (Meso, Pérez and Mendiguren, 2011). This in turn required the re-adaptation of traditional forms of 'e-learning' to respond to new demands by web users, moving towards what has become known as 'e-learning 2.0', which enables greater interaction and collaboration in the generation and construction of knowledge. Faculty must encourage the design and development of interactive virtual social environments in which the true protagonists of the training processes are students themselves, with teachers acting as facilitators of educational reflection processes and generators of innovative social actions.

#### **4. An international experience involving the Basque Country and Brazil**

In this paper we consider the results of an Educational Innovation Project entitled 'Cooperative learning in Online Journalism Reporting using Web 2.0: a joint experience involving the Basque Country and Brazil'. This project goes one step further in developing the use of these digital tools and promoting this type of content and it has been carried out jointly by the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) in Spain and the Mato Grosso do Sul Federal University (UFMS) in Brazil, with the aim of developing the competences required to create multimedia features through cooperation between online journalism students from both universities.

Thanks to an agreement reached between the two universities, within the subject entitled: *Laboratório de Ciberjornalismo I*, which is taught by Gerson Luiz Martins at the Mato Grosso do Sul Federal University in Brazil, students from both institutions use digital tools to exchange instructions, comments and advice (in the form of either text or video) with their counterparts on the other side of the Atlantic regarding the generation of multimedia content. The cooperative process employed in the practical

sessions has therefore been expanded from the physical classroom to the virtual, e-classroom.

The project's principal aim therefore was to foster learning in the field of multimedia feature generation for the online media, a task which requires the development of specific journalistic criteria and the honing of additional writing skills that are complementary to those required for the traditional media. In this undertaking, the ability to plan and produce messages in accordance with the specific characteristics of the language of online journalism (hypertextuality, multimediality and interactivity) is of particular importance, since these messages define the conventions, principles and narrative functions of the different Internet-based journalistic genres.

Specifically, the project has aimed to foster active and cooperative learning in the field of the previously described Online Journalism Reporting course, through the internationalisation of the subject and the use of ICT. The activities carried out as part of the practical side of the subject (writing news articles, creating a blog and multimedia features and using dialogue-based genres), using tools such as *Storify*, *Dipity*, *Meograph*, *Thinglink*, *Wix*, *Pictochart*, *Tumblr*, *Story Maps* and *Infogr.am*, are disseminated over the social media and other web 2.0 tools with the aim of extending the active and cooperative methodology used in the classroom to include other students who are going through the same learning process. The experience is a bidirectional one, with students from the UPV/EHU offering advice to their counterparts at the UFMS and assessing their work in equivalent areas of the syllabus, and vice versa.

The project is based on the hypothesis that the best way of promoting active responsibility in the professional competence acquisition process is to encourage students to complete their communicative processes and publish their journalistic work (which started out as classroom exercises) on a communications platform with widespread dissemination. The idea is that providing students with access to this level of dissemination, which is often overlooked in practical classroom activities, enriches their learning experience by creating an environment much more similar to that in which professional journalists carry out their daily work. Giving students the opportunity to publicly disseminate their unpublished work so that it can be seen by more than their teacher motivates them, enhances their sense of responsibility regarding the quality of the contents and helps encourage them to complete the assignment with a greater degree of dedication and effort.

The second hypothesis on which the project is based is that encouraging students to actively use web 2.0 tools to publish information serves not only to familiarise them with the technical multimedia characteristics of Internet-based communications (providing basic literacy training in digital environments), it is also the only way to enable them to gain first-hand experience of interaction with their audience, one of the key elements of the new media paradigm. The following aims were established in relation to these hypotheses:

a) To motivate students to compile information in a way that transcends the traditional method of compiling content for a single format (written press, radio or TV), encouraging them to take different, interrelated, formats into consideration.

b) To familiarise students with the main characteristics of the new media models, particularly the multidirectional flow of information and the management of the community generated around their messages. This is important since, unlike the creation of static content which characterises the traditional media, Internet-based media content is now dynamic and must constantly adapt to reader suggestions, comments and corrections in a context in which today's news is tomorrow's context.

By engaging in this dialogue, students not only become more adept at using multimedia language, which is obviously common to both the Basque Country and Brazil, they also learn to interact in the development of their contents with a public located at a great physical distance, with a radically different yet at the same time complementary outlook on the world, using digital tools and the social media.

The aim of this exchange between two universities located at such a great physical distance in relation to the same course unit (multimedia news content) is not just to foster cooperation and an active attitude among students, who are obliged to face and respond to the readers of their messages on the web using specific online tools, but also (and in a complementary manner) to promote 'internationalisation at home', a concept which is particularly useful for students who are unable to participate in mobility programmes.

For the faculty of the two twinned subjects participating in this project, the first task was to review the most recent literature and then examine the teaching guides pertaining to each subject, which were found to be very similar in their approach and aims. The objective was not to adapt the theoretical syllabuses of the two subjects (which are taught in the same trimesters and in fact overlap, at least by a couple of weeks), but rather to align the timing of the practical activities and reach an agreement regarding the principal characteristics of the assignments sets, particularly in the case of the larger-scale ones (multimedia features). Faculty at both the UFMS and the UPV/EHU also agreed upon the thematic areas on which the assignments would focus, in order to ensure the highest possible level of universality and mutual understanding.

During the first phase, students taking Online Journalism Reporting engaged in practical activities in the usual manner, which requires them to work collaboratively in groups of 4-5 people. During the first phase, once the trimester had concluded and all the assignments had been published, the faculty selected the three best works from each group for peer review by their colleagues on the other side of the Atlantic.

To unify this review process, the following scheme was devised as a means of focusing attention on the analysis of the multimedia language used:

#### ARTISTIC AND/OR CREATIVE DESIGN

- How would you assess the feature's homepage?
- Do you think the initial visual impression made by the feature is attractive for readers (colours, font, balance between text and images, etc.)?
- Does the design and/or presentation of the written texts included into the feature make reading it easier through the use of bold type, italics, enumeration or links to hypertext, etc.?



## HYPertextUAL DESIGN

- Can the reader move around or navigate through the special feature story easily and/or intuitively?
- How would you rate the sections and subsections used to organise the content of the feature (as regards both number and content)?
- Is it easy for the reader to distinguish or detect the presence of links in the text included in the Wix feature?
- How would you rate the number of links embedded in the text and the quality of the content to which they provide access? Do you think these links serve as key words for the content to which they lead?

## MULTIMEDIALITY

- Do you think the feature contains sufficient complementary multimedia resources such as photographs, videos, audio tracks, graphs and/or interactive elements?
- How would you rate the news interest or value and the number of audiovisual resources developed by the students themselves for this feature?
- How would you rate the news interest or value and the number of audiovisual resources used as a source and not developed by the students themselves (i.e. those obtained from the Internet, YouTube, Vimeo, etc.)?
- How would you rate the sound and visual resources used (in the case of videos, please consider editing also)?

## INTERACTIVITY

- Is it easy to detect the existence of tools which facilitate interactivity in the feature? If not, what tools would you recommend for a feature of this kind?

## MOBILE DEVICES

- Responsive design / Ubiquity, Mobility
- Is the feature adapted for mobile devices?

## OTHER ISSUES

- Do you consider this work to be a feature story?
- Are the sources used adequate, as regards both number and diversity (official, non-official, personal, documentary, etc.)? Are they related to the issue in question and do they provide relevant information?
- Is the work publishable? Could it be disseminated through an online media outlet (assessment of professionalism)?
- Do you think that the feature shows that the students responsible for it have acquired the competences required of an online journalist?

During the second phase, upon conclusion of each of the multimedia features compiled and published on the group blog (news, feature, dialogue-based genre), the results will be shared with the students' counterparts at the other university through

the social media and web 2.0 tools. Feedback between students will be provided through comments on blogs, tweets, Facebook entries and specially-made videos and will incorporate each group's recommendations and proposals for improving the content in question.

Moreover, both the results of the research project itself and a sample of the best work produced in each subject and in each country will be presented at two international online journalism conferences organised by the teachers themselves: the International Online Journalism Conference held in Bilbao in November, and the International Online Journalism Symposium held every June at Campus Grande (Brazil). This enables students to share their work at forums attended by some of the leading professionals currently working in the online media and top academics conducting research into this field.

Finally, at the end of this second phase, satisfaction questionnaires will be administered to participating students with the aim of identifying areas in which the training proposal can be improved in the future.

## **5. Conclusions**

Although the project is still in its first phase, there are two main preliminary conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of the experience so far:

1. The publication of the practical assignments on free-access public platforms fosters the acquisition of the competences and skills inherent in the subject and provides students with a more realistic idea of the characteristics and workings of professional practice. This change in the way Journalism is studied helps foster a greater degree of dedication and responsibility among students when completing their Online Journalism Reporting assignments, which in turn results in better quality work and helps students learn how to solve the problems inherent in the task in an autonomous and creative way.
2. The use of a web 2.0 tool for publishing the work produced helps students acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities they will need to generate content in the diverse formats required by today's new communications models. However, although they initiate students into the use of basic characteristics, advanced multimedia contents have also been found to necessitate the use of a greater range of tools and require more effort and dedication to technical aspects, while interaction with readers is limited.

In short, this educational innovation in teaching methods enables students to acquire a more realistic idea of what journalism is all about; it provides them with an insight into the responsibility involved in providing people with information and helps them to internalise certain basic characteristics of the profession and to dedicate more time to compiling information, bearing in mind at all times the consequences of the content they publish.

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