

Reflections on the shifting shape of journalism education in the Covid-19 pandemic

Abstract:

Journalists usually report on crisis. The Covid -19 pandemic places journalists, like everyone else, in the crisis. Thus, it presents a unique challenge to journalism, which is founded on the principle of impartiality, and to journalism educators, striving to teach professional values in an online environment, whilst also focusing on student wellbeing. This paper shares the initial reflections of journalism practitioners who are members of a journalism education research group within the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice at Bournemouth University in the UK. The overarching theme considers the delivery of high quality, industry - facing and relevant journalism education in a digital environment and within a context where we are all part of the story. We reflect on building community and identity for undergraduate and postgraduate students; the challenges of teaching the normative values and skills of journalism (such as objectivity, accuracy, fairness), emotional literacy and the delivery of industry-accredited standards. These individual reflections are presented as a collective essay which engages with questions of identity, self and voice: how can we instil a sense of wellbeing in journalism students who may feel anxious and marginalised? How can they focus on telling the stories of others when they are part of the same story? How can we best engage with these challenges in a digital environment, whilst instilling an understanding of the importance of self-care and wellbeing? In responding and adapting to crisis, we have also discovered - through the work of our students in the virtual classroom - new ways of teaching journalism and innovative approaches to storytelling as we grapple together with the shifting shapes of journalism practice and journalism education.

Key words: journalism education; community; identity; empathy; wellbeing; self-reflection

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Introduction:

“I did find the whole experience very moving... no story has ever touched me like this one has or affected me as profoundly”- Fergus Walsh, 5 May 2020.

Journalists usually report *on* crisis, but the Covid-19 pandemic places journalists, like everyone else, *in* the crisis. When the BBC’s health correspondent, Fergus Walsh, put on

PPE¹ to report from an intensive care unit (ICU) in London's University College Hospital, his powerful report showed people the effects of coronavirus "from the frontline," (Mayhew, 2020). He was reporting on a story, which he is a part of, as we all are. This presents unique challenges for journalism, which we as a small group of journalism educators have tussled with and reflected upon over the past few months. We are trying to teach undergraduate and postgraduate journalism students how to report on this crisis, how to be impartial observers, telling the stories of others, whilst living within it. As a collective, the Journalism Education Research group within the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice at Bournemouth University, we aim to embrace a wide range of influences and voices within the changing landscape of journalism practice. We stand for reimagining and rethinking through listening and whilst we hope to make timely interventions in debate, an interest in the 'human' side of journalism practice binds us together. This underpins pedagogic practices with a strong emphasis on community, voice, empathy and self-reflection.

This essay will consider how we sought to sustain these principles and to develop them with our students, whilst also living in the story ourselves. It shares our lived experiences of teaching journalism online throughout lockdown and our 'reflections-in-action' (Schon, 1995) and is presented as a series of vignettes, to provide a commentary on how we are all grappling with a range of issues both individually and collectively within the context of crisis. We reflect on these specific pedagogic challenges within our discipline: teaching industry-accredited skills in an online environment, including community journalism, objective news reporting and original storytelling; managing student wellbeing; developing voice and self-identity with a cohort of graduating journalism students and building compassion within a digital space for international postgraduates.

1. Survival Video: Reflections on teaching mobile journalism during lockdown

Michael Sunderland and Dr Graham Majin reflect on shifts in pedagogic practice during crisis

Another of the memorable news reports from the earlier stages of the pandemic was delivered by ITV Wales Correspondent Rob Osborne who used his own family to educate and inform the public about social distancing and self-isolation. Osborne's mother, who has underlying

¹ PPE has come into regular use as an acronym now: Personal Protective Equipment.

health conditions and cares for his uncle with Down's syndrome, was interviewed by her son on her doorstep with the help of a two-metre boom pole (Osborne, 2020).

Osborne's report, along with the rise in "lockdown diary"-style videos (see, for example, Estefania, 2020; Toniolo, 2020), inspired our approach to adapting industry-accredited television journalism teaching for first year undergraduates to a mobile journalism, "survivor video" alternative. The changes made overnight to teaching and assessment mirrored many of the challenges and innovations with which video journalists are currently grappling in industry, whilst also aiming to protect public health.

Gone was access to campus studios, newsrooms and broadcast-quality production equipment. In normal circumstances we would insist that students "get down into town" to seek out stories as objective observers (Bourdieu, 1977), now we were asking them to stay at home to create short pieces about their households using only their phones. The result, somewhat surprisingly, was an array of interesting, newsworthy features that, together, provide an important snapshot of young life during the early stages of lockdown. Stories ranged from one student's social carer mother providing end-of-life support via video chat to a student's interview with her mother who is a cake decorator, in which she shares her fears of losing twelve months of wages. Her story can be seen here:

<https://buzz.bournemouth.ac.uk/2020/06/lockdown-diaries-business/>

Such submissions are today in line with industry standards, having adapted to crisis. In addition, by looking within their own households, our students ensured the representation of a diverse range of communities and voices that may have previously been unheard.

Journalism's periphery has been the focus of much academic discussion in recent years (Eldrige, 2018; Ryfe, 2019) but interviewing family members appears to be the symptom of a very specific set of circumstances. Rob Osborne later commented on how he had once been able to separate his journalistic work from his own feelings but struggled to do so where loved ones were involved (Mays, 2020). Covid-19 is redrawing the boundaries of the journalistic field. It has broken down objectivity, amplified subjectivity, and reminded students and professionals alike that, sometimes, we are all part of the story.

In other words, the pandemic is a catalyst. Pre-recorded lectures offer an opportunity to produce more engaging video content which reach out to others and interview them on Zoom, drawing on their expertise and knowledge. Boundaries blur. University lecturers become content creators. We have found ourselves doing exactly this. To provide a masterclass for students in mobile video production, we collaborated with a professional trainer who teaches BBC and ITV journalists. The result was a pre-recorded “survival video” tutorial, followed by a live, online Q&A. Pedagogy becomes TV. Lectures become a genre of edutainment. Lines are blurred as standards shift in broadcast media too: Viewers are asked to self-film and share their lock-down videos. Who are producers? Who are consumers? The broadcast media, including the news, has become a gigantic YouTube. How will this change the delivery of journalism and media pedagogy in the long term? The pandemic is a catalyst for something. The question is what?

2. Under fire: Reflections on changing perceptions in teaching professional journalism standards

Miriam Phillips and David Brine reflect on community reporting and the challenges of upholding professional industry standards in assessment and feedback during crisis.

How do you teach student journalists the importance of reporting on their community when that community is closed off to them? After all, the community is where many journalistic careers begin with traditional patch reporting². Covid-19 changed the rules: Forced to share computers or work from their bedrooms, many students found common barriers to news gathering even more impenetrable. As journalism educators, delivering training to both professionals and undergraduates studying for their NCTJ Diploma in Journalism³ we had to reimagine their lives under unusual constraints.

The lockdown period for many trainee journalists has been one of intense pressure, with countless experienced newsroom colleagues furloughed, they find themselves covering stories that are normally the preserve of the seasoned reporter. The trainees broke down emotionally with alarming regularity in our online drop in sessions, describing their overnight

² Reporting on a local area ‘from the ground up.’

³ The National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) is the leading industry body for the training of journalists.

change from community reporter to chief reporter. They have asked for help dealing with interviewing bereaved relatives day in day out, all from the confines of their own homes. As educators and journalists, we have to admit that we don't always have the answers. We can advise of best practice, of ways of dealing with trauma but actually this is unprecedented territory for everyone.

However, with the normal structure of the newsroom temporarily gone, it is enlightening to hear that students have benefited from learning the invaluable skill of building contact lists from the ground up. These trainees discuss how they are having to redefine their notion of what their community was pre COVID-19, now trying to establish themselves in the "new normal". Journalists may have been classed as "keyworkers"⁴, but trainee journalists are facing scepticism, often under fire on social media, and feel the need to redefine their roles. They have to work to build trust, to be welcomed into the Zoom rooms of groups ranging from parish fundraising groups to police task forces updates.

These official sources, deluged by media enquiries, became unavailable to undergraduate journalism students, who had to find creative ways to report on stories and access sources. However, in the move to online teaching we could not compromise professional standards. Teaching a news gathering and writing unit aligned to NCTJ industry exams, the importance of the pyramid structure, urgent and compelling writing, and unimpeachable punctuation remained key. But how to communicate this to students? One of the unforeseen consequences of students being isolated at home and unable to meet lecturers in person was how feedback has been received. Routine observations about writing style, quote punctuation and the importance of proof-reading copy – that once would have been accepted without question – were suddenly taken as personal affronts.

So how do we retain robust feedback that maintains those vital standards without damaging our students' self-confidence, made fragile by the current circumstances? Covid-19 has been a salutary lesson in the importance of being sensitive to the perceptions of feedback. Now,

⁴ Since 23 March 2020, the government has included journalists covering the pandemic in their list of keyworkers: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>

more than ever, we must consider the tone of constructive criticism as well as the content and deliver formative feedback with added care. Certainly, the importance of nuanced writing has been highlighted in these unprecedented days. There is never a bad time to be reminded of good pedagogic practice.

3. Living in a box: using Zoom to manage student wellbeing during lockdown

Dr Andrew Bissell reflects upon care during crisis

Student wellbeing was a matter of national concern before the pandemic (Hubble and Bolton, 2020; Pereira et al., 2020; Crawford, 2018; Thorley, 2017). Global calamity duly witnessed new anxieties and uncertainties. Indeed, while our very being is to interpret our world (Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 2004), much simply defied understanding. In philosophical terms, if wellbeing is seen as “a unity of dwelling and mobility”(Galvin and Todres, 2013: 78), it derives from a sense of peace and rootedness which is complemented by the possibility of movement. Three experiential ‘domains’ of dwelling-mobility – concerning space, relationships and identity – have helped inform our management of student wellbeing during the crisis.

Firstly, wellbeing is derived from a settled sense of ‘at-home’ dwelling co-existing with the possibility of adventure (Galvin and Todres, 2013). The pandemic upset this delicate equilibrium. Not all students found sanctuary in family homes and many struggled to adjust to new domestic circumstances. In response, a weekly Zoom drop-in was offered to our journalism students. It is a social space to informally meet with peers and staff. It’s also a caring community retreat for dwelling-mobility reassurance, a place to restore a semblance of spatial balance. While instances of unsettled homeliness are sensitively discussed, and new routines suggested, students’ curtailed mobility is reflected in amended assignments and reset expectations.

Secondly, wellbeing is found within the relational, inter-subjective domain. This requires a comforting sense of dwelling derived from familiar belonging coupled with a feeling of mobility manifest in openness and attraction to otherness (Galvin and Todres, 2013). The dwelling side can be seen to encompass the supportive peer relations and meaningful staff bonds that are important to student belonging (Thomas, 2012; Meehan and Howells, 2018).

This kinship had to be preserved when the campus became virtual. Familiar belonging had to be recreated in an unfamiliar space. The weekly Zoom drop-in provides a chance to “check in with friends” as one student put it. Staff-student relationships have also been enriched: Hierarchies are flattened when we peer into each other’s homes and into each other’s lives. We learn more about each other. There is a sense that belonging to the same dreadful story has fostered a need to belong together. Nonetheless, the virtual sphere can also accentuate a sense of human distance and estrangement. Some Zoom boxes remain black and many more students have failed to appear at all. Deeper understanding of belonging and wellbeing awaits discovery within the stillness of their absence.

Finally, wellbeing is derived from identity. Wellbeing requires a secure sense of ‘I am’. This is a reminder of home and an identity “supported by ‘merely being’ rather than ‘having to be’ something or someone” (Galvin and Todres, 2013: 91). Yet wellbeing also requires a sense of ‘I can’, of becoming. Isolated at home, anxiety willingly fills the void between how one currently self-interprets and how one wishes to self-interpret (Bissell, 2018). This denied becoming can feel like denial of one’s future. Some students fear they will not become graduates. Others fear they will not become journalists during a time of economic implosion (Mayhew and Turvill, 2020). The Zoom drop-in is often used to stress the importance of simply being, of caring for oneself in the here and now. While wellbeing requires becoming, becoming also requires wellbeing. Becoming can be held in abeyance until one feels ready to step forward from the present.

4. Self-stories and the stories of others

Dr Karen Fowler-Watt reflects on marginalised voices as a theme in journalism education during crisis

Marginalised voices and the stories of others constitute the theme of my teaching with final year undergraduate journalism students. In this “autobiographical age” (Plummer, 2001), they are encouraged to interrogate journalism’s normative values and to reflect on their own identity. The notion of self, which connects to the sense of identity is characterised by the “crucial feature of human agency” (Taylor, 1989: 33-4) and based on an awareness that we are each a “culturally understood self” grounded in a larger story (Denzin 1989). The students engage with a range of visiting speakers, who share their lived experiences with generous self-reflexivity. This included a contribution from BBC foreign correspondent

Fergal Keane⁵, known for his empathic reporting; he urged them to: “challenge yourselves” and to “rigorously investigate your own opinions, to take what you believe and subject it to forensic examination ...[in order to] critically try to see things from the point of view of the other person” (Keane, 2018).

As we entered lockdown and moved to “challenge ourselves” in a digital space, the themes of emotional literacy, marginality and voice were placed into the context of immediate crisis. The ‘forensic examination’ of our own beliefs assumed greater urgency. This was a crisis that we were all living in, it was shifting the shape of our identities (Beaumont, 2009) and it infused the students’ final individual presentations. They posed questions such as “Is the journalist a marginalised voice?” “Has the media’s coverage of the global pandemic silenced marginalised voices?”, covering issues from the effect of lockdown on the homeless to domestic abuse and women’s rights; “Can journalists maintain professional values?” such as objectivity and the impact of reporting ‘traumatic news events’ on journalists’ mental health.

As they graduate, the experience of living in crisis, whilst examining how journalists report on crisis has, I sense, shaped their own ‘self-stories’. It has enabled each of us to engage with notions of voice, marginality and empathy in ways that we could never have predicted at the start of the year. These are evident in the students’ accompanying reflections - captured in audio recordings - on their craft and their developing ‘sense of self’. They offered their own professional perspectives, articulating confidence in the power of their own voices, determination to advocate for marginalised people and to avoid stigma and stereotype in their storytelling.

My own shifting shape is yet to come into view, but early reflections focus on how I found myself drawing on my journalistic identity and applying this to pedagogy online: for example, employing the tools of crisis intervention and trauma training, such as group debriefings on Zoom, so that the students could “integrate traumatic experience into their own personal narrative”, reframing their experiences to enable growth and resilience (Barker

⁵ The students watched a filmed keynote that Keane made for our research centre’s Media Education Summit in Hong Kong in 2018,, ‘From where I Stand’, which is available as an open access educational resource here: <https://www.cemp.ac.uk/summit/2018/>

in Moy et al, 2019: 49). In analysing reporting of the Covid crisis, we found new ways of understanding the importance of listening as voice (Parks and Foot, in Moy et al, 2019: 19) and of its dialogic qualities, leading us to question with new vigour the authority of journalists and the framing of stories (Carlson, 2017). This discussion assumed a global perspective as we delved into the reporting of the pandemic on the Global Voices participatory website⁶ and sought to understand the ways in which others are living in the same story, sharing their personal narratives as citizen journalists in different socio-political and cultural contexts. If the pandemic marks an epiphany that leaves a mark on all our lives (Denzin, 1989), I wonder whether our graduating students' 'self-stories' will shape their future journalistic practice in a way that is empathic, focused on listening and critically aware of others? I hope so.

5. Compassion as a Pedagogical Principle

Dr Jaron Murphy reflects on teaching an international Master's cohort during crisis

In a recent article, entitled "A new approach to social sciences, humanities in a time of crisis", Jess Auerbach and Nina Hall (2020) urge that we purposefully embrace compassion as an underlying principle of pedagogy. Compassion, they assert, "requires more: rather than neutrality or attempts at objectivity, it asks for care, for feeling... for empathy" encompassing colleagues, institutions and "above all" our students. They observe that many academics "are already exploring ways to put care at the centre of emerging forms of adjusted and online education".

As the implications and effects of the campus and wider society lockdown became known, providing compassionate support was naturally central to my exploratory consultations with students in order to ascertain impacts on their well-being, gain a sense of their individual circumstances (in the UK and overseas), and assess feasibility of activities. An acute appreciation of pastoral care "as central to engendering holistic guidance and support" yet subject to "strain" (Stephen et al, 2008:449) is nothing new, of course, at the heart of research-informed pedagogic practice but the extraordinary ramifications of the pandemic

⁶ Global Voices is a Dutch on-profit, its Covid-19 coverage can be accessed here: <https://globalvoices.org/-/special/covid-19/>

necessitated scaling up care simultaneously and inclusively to entire and diverse groups of students, in community-focused as well as individually bespoke ways.

As Auerbach and Hall (2020) ultimately convey, compassion asks not only “for care, for feeling... for empathy” but calls, too, for effective pedagogical *action*. My experience of supporting an international mix of MA Investigative Journalism students has involved adjusting and developing new approaches to teaching, supervision, and assessment (both formative and summative) via online methods, in order to ensure that a) no one in the group is disadvantaged in any way, wherever they currently live; b) quality and depth of learning are maintained, including through suitable adjustment of tutorials for students in different time zones; c) revised assessment requirements and deadlines can realistically be met by all through reliable online access; and d) each student knows I am aware of their particular situation and accessible to provide continued guidance. Key to the process of adjustment to virtual learning has been sensitively framing the pandemic as a context for development of journalistic empathy, resilience and employability, bolstered by reassurances that uneven motivation and periods of productivity are to be expected in such challenging circumstances.

With the permission of my students, I am able to share some of the initial feedback I received, which duly led to compassionately pragmatic revision of the remainder of their studies on the unit: “I am feeling quite lost”; “I am really struggling”; “I am anxious”. One student highlighted the eeriness of working under lockdown: “There is the added complication of working from home with the ghost of COVID-19 hanging about and haunting social media feeds.” The student also expressed personal concerns: “I am finding it quite difficult to adjust... while I’m concerned for my family, many of whom are frontline health workers and preparing to go onto critical care wards.”

At the time of writing, my experience of developing a ‘pandemic pedagogy’ has brought two main issues into sharp focus. Firstly, ongoing student feedback has confirmed the validity of Auerbach and Hall’s (2020) view of the critical importance of exercising our capacity for compassion. Secondly, the rapid turn to online technology should serve to facilitate compassionate connection and interaction as forms, too, of quality and depth of educational

experience supporting the achievement of intended learning outcomes. In journalism education specifically, we could adapt Julie Posetti's research insights into 'Shiny Things Syndrome' in industry by reflecting on whether we have consciously and truly shifted from being "technology-led, to audience-focused [i.e. student-focused] and technology-empowered" (Posetti 2018:7).

Conclusions:

"At the end of the day, education is about forming personas. It is about integral, responsible citizens who, for sure, are employable, but more importantly are committed to their community and with a broad perspective on what happens in the world" – Francisco Marmalejo, 2020.

This collection of individual and co-authored vignettes offers early reflections which are encouraging us as a group of journalism educators to reimagine our pedagogic practices. They illustrate how our collective interest in the 'human' side of journalism has been placed under a bright spotlight during lockdown; how the move to a digital space has encouraged new ways of thinking about community, voice and empathy. As for so many others, the personal and the professional have become merged to co-exist within virtual spaces where hierarchies are flattened for students and staff alike. The challenges of upholding industry standards and delivering professional skills are being met in a context where these standards are constantly shifting due to the 'new normal' of social distancing, changed newsroom environments and a renewed focus on journalism's civic role. Similarly, the development of a "pedagogy of compassion" constitutes a pragmatic response, shaped by our personal narratives as we strive, within the context of global crisis, to discern the shifting shape of journalism education and to continue to seek salience in telling the stories of others.

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Conclusion

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Dr Graham Majin lectures in documentary journalism at Bournemouth University. His research area is how the concept of truth is understood differently by audiences, journalists and academics. His project is inter-disciplinary and examines issues of media literacy, journalistic theory and fake news. Graham has more than 20 years’ experience working in TV news as an on-screen reporter, news editor and senior producer.

Mike Sunderland is a journalist and lecturer in television, video and documentary journalism at Bournemouth University. Specialising in foreign news, he has worked as a producer, reporter and camera operator for a range of international outlets. His research interests focus on the media framing of humanitarian crises.

Miriam Phillips is an editor, publisher and journalism lecturer at Bournemouth University, where she coordinates NCTJ accredited teaching and exams. Miriam trained as a newspaper reporter for Newsquest, specialising in crime, court, digital and investigative reporting. At BU she leads the Facebook Community Reporter training project.

Abstract
Digital Culture and Education
Covid-19 special edition
Fowler-Watt, K., et al.

David Brine was formerly deputy news editor and features editor of the Southern Daily Echo. He now lectures at Bournemouth University, teaching news, features and online journalism and on the NCTJ- accredited undergraduate degree.

Dr Andrew Bissell is Programme Leader of BA Multimedia Journalism at Bournemouth University. He joined the university in 2013 following a journalism career spanning three decades. His research considers how students 'become' professionals and the application of philosophically informed approaches to teaching.

Dr Jaron Murphy leads the Investigative Journalism unit on MA Multimedia Journalism at Bournemouth University. He has extensive international experience in journalism encompassing print and digital news, mostly in senior editorial and management roles. His journalism achievements include national awards for courageous hard news and investigative journalism. Jaron is included in the NCTJ list of most respected journalists.