

Engaging with data: reflections on developing a data journalism course

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers a range of issues – pedagogical, institutional, practical – involved in developing and running the MA Interactive Journalism programme at City University London, one of the first postgraduate journalism courses to include a dedicated data journalism module.

1. INTRODUCTION

The decision to develop what became the MA Interactive Journalism programme at City University London was taken in 2010, partly in response to the changing nature of journalism and the employment prospects in the sector. New roles in data journalism – as well as those focused on social media, the other specialism offered by the programme – were emerging, and my colleagues and I expected that interest from potential students in our more ‘traditional’ postgraduate courses would diminish. We wished also to continue the Department of Journalism’s involvement in discussions and research about contemporary developments in the industry, as well as in teaching and professional practice.

Setting up and running the Interactive course meant addressing a number of issues – pedagogical, institutional and practical, among others. Reflecting on this process, the outcomes, and the evolution of the programme over its first three years of operation, has formed the basis for this paper.

2. PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

The rationale was that the programme would aim to prepare students for general roles in journalism, as well as providing the opportunity for them to specialize in data (and/or social media). Its focus was thus to be wider than simply data journalism – where, in any case, specialist roles might well demand a thorough grasp of media law, professional ethics and standards, innovation and business, as well as the essentials of newsgathering, reporting and other key aspects of journalism practice.

The MA Interactive Journalism students learn the latter alongside colleagues on the successful MA Newspaper Journalism, which evolved out of the first journalism course at City University London, which started in 1976. In recent years the programme had evolved much more than its name – kept partly for reasons of reputation and marketing – might suggest, to include a range of online and multimedia work, for example.

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3. INVOLVING PRACTITIONERS

The core content for the new modules was developed in consultation with practitioners – those doing the job day-to-day. For data journalism, this included two leading data journalists who also happened to be City alumni: Simon Rogers, then data editor of *The Guardian*, and his colleague James Ball. Simon had started to train other journalists, and James had already returned to City as a visiting lecturer, teaching computer assisted reporting on the MA Investigative Journalism (established a few years earlier). The other key player was Paul Bradshaw, who had taken over leadership of the core Online Journalism module for journalism postgraduates in the Department, and had become a professor at the university as well as a leading data journalism trainer. These three were also to teach on the module.

This reflects a key approach of the Department – the prominent involvement of current practitioners in teaching students, particularly at postgraduate level. This also helps to ensure that students learn up-to-date skills and understanding, and addresses a familiar issue in journalism education: the difficulties of keeping the curriculum and the skills of academic staff up to date [1].

4. KEEPING CURRENT

A related challenge concerned the relatively recent emergence of data journalism and its continuing evolution. This meant there was little by way of an established ‘canon’ of agreed theory, understanding and practice (although the curriculum could draw on computer assisted reporting and relevant aspects from other disciplines). Vocationally-oriented programmes often encounter difficulties in keeping up to date with cutting-edge practice – which inevitably outstrips the curriculum [2]. The practitioners could draw on their own current practice as data journalists, and on what they knew of others’ work – but we felt more was needed to ensure that the curriculum involved students keeping up to date in this rapidly evolving and – importantly – interdisciplinary field.

Building on experiential learning and social constructivist approaches in journalism education [3, 4], the solution was to encourage students to take a highly independent, pro-active approach, based partly on continued professional development. Students are assessed partly on the basis of their documenting their own work in progress and research (which can be journalistic) into the field of data journalism.

They do this through blog posts that they publish on their own sites and/or on the Interhacktives website that the students run collaboratively. Typically they include: ‘how to’ posts; critical analysis of pieces of data journalism; interviews with

practitioners; their own data journalism work and reflections on this; and evaluation of relevant new tools or techniques.

As well as underlining current practice in data journalism, this approach has a sound pedagogical foundation, emphasizing active learning and offering benefits from positioning students as peers with valuable perspectives [5], emphasising participation [6], with elements of students as co-creators of learning [7], making extensive choices [8], with elements of collaborative learning, peer tutoring and teaching [9, 10].

Additionally, it recognises the value of reflective practice and encourages this [11], and demonstrates the ability to collaborate and operate effectively in the environment of modern networked journalism. It fosters, too an open approach and independent learning that involves contact with practitioners and peers – reflecting a key element in the practice and growth of data journalism, identified by Howard [12]. This also tends to enhance the profile of the students in the field of data journalism and among potential employers.

5. APPEAL TO POTENTIAL STUDENTS

Eight months before the programme was due to start, it was hard to gauge the likely level of interest. Certainly if developments relevant to data journalism in the UK were taken as a yardstick, it was reasonable to expect a favourable start: 2010 saw the huge Wikileaks releases of war logs from Afghanistan and Iraq, and of US diplomatic cables. The use of Freedom of Information legislation was becoming better established in journalism, and in 2009 had been at the heart of one of the biggest stories of the decade – on MPs' expenses. The Open Data movement was also gathering pace [13].

In practice, the launch of the MA Interactive Journalism in general, and in its teaching of data journalism in particular, was greeted with more interest probably from the media and established journalists than from potential students. While the press coverage may have raised awareness of the course among the latter, there was certainly no flood of applications from would-be data journalists.

In many ways this is not surprising – particularly when one considers the likely influences on prospective students. Any new MA programme faces hurdles; it has no alumni to sing its praises, for example, and whom applicants could ask about their experiences of it (as often happens with our other journalism MAs). Similarly, it has no track record and may not be well-known among journalists, whom applicants might meet on work experience and/or contact for advice – unlike, for example, the MA Newspaper Journalism.

How far would potential applicants be familiar with data journalism – or even have heard of it? Our MA journalism applicants at City typically had relevant vocational experience as student journalists, as an undergraduate, and/or from a few weeks' spent on work experience on a local paper, radio station or news agency. Some would have interned at a national newspaper, too.

Overall, they were unlikely to encounter data journalism 'close up' – and anyone who practiced it -- in any of these. Despite the high profile of the war logs and other data stories, this was still a new and rare creature in the UK, largely confined to specific enclosures at a few large national and international news organisations. And, at that time, sighted even more rarely in student or local journalism. Nor was it likely to be familiar to others with whom they might discuss career plans, such as their parents or university career advisers.

In the end, 11 students enrolled on the first year of the MA Interactive Journalism, which started in September 2011. Around half had applied specifically for the programme – the others had applied initially to the MA Newspaper Journalism but switched course before it began or in induction week. Some decided to ask about changing course after an introductory lecture about data journalism (to the combined cohort of Interactive and Newspaper students) given by Simon Rogers, then data editor at *The Guardian*, and injected with his customary enthusiasm.

6. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AS A GATEWAY TO DATA JOURNALISM

Freedom of Information (FoI) has proved essential to the development of data journalism in the UK [13], where FoI legislation came properly into force on 1 January 2005. Since then, every student on the courses I run has researched an FoI project to generate their own original story for publication.

When it came to data journalism, it seemed that FoI could provide a valuable bridge from more conventional reporting to data, for a number of reasons. It often involves datasets – typically numbers, for example, and analysing changes over time. FoI work often requires comparisons and the examination of trends and other patterns – as well as understanding how data is obtained and recorded (or not). It may require students to use Excel and basic statistical functions, and to start to grapple with large volumes of data. They may also have to wrestle with ambiguities, inconsistencies, gaps in information, and the importance of precision and repetition. In short, it serves as a valuable introduction to aspects of computational thinking [14] and remains firmly on the curriculum for the MA Interactive Journalism.

7. OTHER ISSUES

A number of other relevant issues are not discussed more fully in the written version of this paper but include:

- The apparent ambivalence or antipathy of some journalism students towards mathematics, computing and/or technology.
- Perhaps related to the previous point, the predominance of humanities and arts subjects as the first degree and/or A-level subjects among graduate journalism students.
- The value for journalism students in using social media to network with and learn from practitioners [15].
- Highlighting with students the value of them learning to learn and becoming more aware of the factors that underpin effective learning, using an exercise developed by Race [16].

8. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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