

# Curricula Design and Teaching Practices of the Online Journalism Module in the United Kingdom

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## Abstract

*This article presents the findings of research into Curricula Design and Teaching Practices of the Online Journalism Module in the United Kingdom. The researcher applied two data collection methods i.e. after collecting 14 course syllabi, the content was analyzed by the method of documentary analysis and in-depth interviews were conducted with 6 lecturers in order to obtain the data in detail. Most of the topics which lecturers teach in each subject are as follows :*

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For journalism subjects, lecturers teach about the differences between old and new media as well as news reporting and writing for online journalism. For web site subjects, most of the topics which lecturers teach are about web site management, design and layout. For subjects concerning technology, lecturers teach their course takers about how to use Dream Weaver software program, and how to upload. Most of the assessments of the modules are projects.

The results from the in - depth interviews have indicated that basic skills for journalists are still necessary. At the same time, online journalists need to have special skills related to new media technologies. Due to a wide variety of technologies and their rapid changes, the lecturers have to find out how to combine the theory and practice together.

## Introduction

For more than ten years, the development of technology has affected and changed the way of life. This has also affected the newspaper organizations.

In 1996, two subsidiaries of a newspaper organization had been granted the concessions from CAT Telecom Public Company Limited. They were Manager Media Group company and Watta Classified Company Limited. This means that newspaper organizations were alert and interested in this new trend. After that, many newspaper organizations had their online version depending on their human resources and budget.

Prawut Phoermsap (1997) confirmed that the media organizations adjusted their organization structure by introducing a new

department to manage internet system for their organization. This made their organizations expand. Moreover, Kitiphong Thaichareon (1998) found that most of the media organizations thought that information technology is useful to be commercial and competitive.

Kriengkrai Thawechotkitcharoen (2000) found that many media organizations invested in internet technology as a way to run their business. Although at that time, this was only an extra channel for printed newspaper to communicate with their readers. Because many studies during 1998-2002 have shown that the content in online newspaper was the same as their printed version.

Journalism studies is the science relating to collecting, writing, editing and publishing of news stories in periodicals. (The Royal Institute, 1999 : 1,069) It is also the work of studying newspapers, magazines and other publications.

In terms of journalistic work styles, journalists have changed in many ways, for example from using a typewriter to working with a computer, or from returning back to the office to write news stories to sending news to editorial team via the internet regardless of time and place.

For more than a decade, Journalism studies for a bachelor's degree in most of the universities have been adjusted in order to set a new trend of studying with the introduction of information technology topic into some modules in the curricula. The main cause of this adjustment was the development of technology.

As the emergence of the internet affected changes in the journalistic working, the first online newspaper was launched to the readers. Its

growth also affected universities which offer Journalism studies. Some universities have introduced “Online Journalism Production” module into the curricula because they intend to develop students’ skills for students who aim to work for web sites of newspaper companies who are known as “Online Reporters”.

In Thailand, Journalism was first established as an academic discipline in 1939 at Newspaper Department of the Faculty of Literature and the Faculty of Science, offering a diploma course at Chulalongkorn University. At that period, Thailand’s Prime Minister, Plaek Piboonsongkram wanted to educate government officials and to train journalists in order that the country could be developed and modernized with the influence and thoughts of the western world. After that, the mass communication industry had expanded and extended into many kinds of media e.g. broadcasting, public relations and advertising. This, therefore, made the education sector develop and strengthen this field. (Neunghathai Khopolklang and Ubonwan Preamsirat, 2006)

As the field of journalism developed, academic institutions in Thailand began to set up new academic departments (such as Department of Mass Communication) and this reflected the diverse range of specialized fields relating to journalism. At the same time, most diploma courses were extended into full undergraduate programs. Some Journalism Departments were renamed the Faculty of Communication Arts, which was also to reflect this diversity.

In 1996, a strong influence on every branch of Communication Arts was information technology. According to the Thailand Education Development Plan version 8, the plan was

implemented to develop people by using both mass communication and information technology to be the main tools for education services and knowledge sources. Since that period, the universities involved in teaching mass communication have adjusted themselves to set the new trend of studying with information technology topics in some modules in the curricula. (Neunghathai Khopolklang and Ubonwan Preamsirat, 2006)

### Problem

In the past decade, the framework of teaching Online Journalism for Journalism studies for Bachelor’s degrees in Thailand has not been established as in developed countries yet. Because it is a new module for Journalism departments which have just revised their curricula with information technology topics. Some departments have set Online Journalism to be a new required module which requires applying modern technology while some departments have established it merely as an elective module.

The researcher has found that the United Kingdom is home to the world’s leading practitioners in media studies. This is because there are many Journalism courses in the institutes of higher and further education. Most of these courses have been approved by the National Council for the Training of Journalist (NCTJ).

By studying how Online Journalism is taught in the United Kingdom universities, the researcher can take the findings from this case to develop more appropriate and modern teaching materials for delivery in Thailand. Moreover, others countries around the world can gain

some benefits from the findings more or less the same way as the country of the researcher will.

## Methodology

This study is a qualitative research which is done by collecting the data with 2 methodologies. The research began with the module syllabi documentary analysis and followed with in - depth interviews to see what they have been teaching in the classroom and what was going on in teaching this module in the United Kingdom.

## Results

### Phase 1 : Documentary analysis

During August – September 2007, the researcher got Online Journalism modules of 14 course syllabi and curricula from the sampling group then carried out documentary analysis by checking each topic in the prepared coding sheets.

From the total number of 167 universities in the United Kingdom, 53 universities have been offering Journalism Studies and 31 universities have been offering Journalism Studies with online modules. 14 of the universities which have online modules agree to participate in this study.

It is found that the first university to offer Online Journalism module in the sampling group began this in 1997 while the latest universities began offering the module in 2007.

Most of the universities have been offering Online Journalism module as the only one module in their curricula. In addition, the module is given the name “Online Journalism”

mostly. Some universities have been offering 2 Online Journalism modules in the curricula which teach about advance online journalism.

For the topics which have been taught in Online Journalism modules, the research results are divided into two parts : theory part and assessment part.

The topics which are taught in Online Journalism modules in the theoretical part are subdivided into three subject groups. First, in the group of Journalism subjects, most of the topics which lecturers teach are about the differences between old and new media, reporting for online journalism and writing for online journalism. Second, in the group of web site subjects, most of the topics which lecturers teach are about web management, web design and layout and web site production.

Lastly, for the group of technology subjects, this consists of 2 sections that are the section of web builder software programs and the section of graphic software programs. In the first section, most of the topics which lecturers teach are about Dream Weaver software program, uploaded via/using File Transfer Protocol (FTP) and Hypertext Markup Language (HTML). It should be noted that none of the lecturers teaches Front Page software program. In the second section, most of the topics which lecturers teach are about Flash software program and Photoshop program. It should also be noted that none of the lecturers teaches Image Ready program and the Firework program.

In the assessment part, the students will be assessed by the lecturers based on their projects, essays and portfolio work. It should also be noted that none of the lecturers assess the

students with their reports, electronic assessments or oral presentations.

## **Phase 2 : In - depth interview**

Six interviewees were invited to join this study during November – December 2008. Their online journalism courses were established in different years which can certainly show the development of the curricula and also the lecturers' experience. The lecturers were asked by the structured questions on relating topics. Courses relevant to the study were restricted to those started before 2009.

The research findings shown in each topic as follows :

### **1. The essential skills for online journalist nowadays**

Most of the interviewed lecturers agreed that basic skills required for traditional journalism remain the same, which are writing news, editing news and reporting news. Also it is still necessary to train students to be good journalists. The new set of skills for using in training students to be good online journalists are added up on basic skills because online journalists have to work for the different types of media so students should practice some extra skills.

The online media requires students to think, create and be aware of how to choose the best approach for each story. For example online journalists should also possess some technical ability and awareness of how to use new technology to disseminate their work in the most effective manner. The multimedia production is an essential skill in working as an online journalist at present.

### **2. The lecturers' expectation for the students' skill when they complete online journalism module**

Each lecturer has their own expectation for their students' skill after their students complete the module as designed for their courses. Lecturers wish the students to become reflective practitioners which means that the students should have the journalistic and technical skills before starting to work online. They should be able to plan, design and create a website from scratch and fill their newly made website with high quality and appropriate journalistic content including text, pictures, video and audio.

### **3. Work Experience Program**

Five lecturers have said that their universities have a short-term work experience program or work placement for the students, at least 4 weeks and not more than 6 weeks in total which should be fulfilled before completing their Bachelor's degree in Journalism. The students will have to work with news organizations, local newspapers, online news industries, professional newsrooms or working projects with industries. Although one out of six lecturers told that his university has not actually offered work placement, obviously the university encourages and supports the students to get placements.

### **4. Problems in Teaching Online Journalism Module**

The problem that the lecturers have found is how to organize everything within the module. They have been trying to combine both theory and practice together within the time limit of a semester. There are various kinds of technologies which tend to change very quickly.

In addition, the university policies have also affected the courses and lecturers. For example, the university gives more value to research than to teaching. As a result, the lecturers are under pressure to prioritize their time to doing more research. A lecturer mentioned that the university should spend more money on infrastructure and staff development.

#### **5. Topics Which the Lecturers Plan to Add into the Online Journalism Module in the Coming Academic Year**

The lecturers have mentioned “convergence media,” as in current industrial working, which has merged many kinds of media altogether for the web sites. They have been emphasizing a lot more on multimedia training than they had ever offered previously.

They planned to add an amount of convergence teaching in the final module where they may switch some of the present streaming to printing or broadcasting to concentrate or together with a converged module as well as a more varied media convergence. They encourage their broadcast and print students to produce the materials and present their outcome online.

### **Discussions**

#### **1. Journalism Education Changes Caused by the Development of Technologies**

As the development of modern technologies has played a significant role in the working field of journalists, journalism teaching and learning at universities has to be modernized accordingly. Many persons have mentioned mass communication / Journalism education which relevantly supports the fact that the development

of technologies causes Journalism education to change.

John Nightsbitt and Patricia Aberdeen (1991) predicted that information technology and other technologies will have influenced future education. As Neunghathai Khopolklang (1998) who has studied the topic of ‘Development of Education and Training in the Field of Communication in Thailand’ and has found that the changing into the new direction may occur in the newly-established universities which have currently been offering courses in mass communication education with the emphasis on the importance of science and information technology.

Similarly, Brian Mc Nair (1999 : pp. 9-10) wrote “Why journalism matters : Online services” in the book entitled *News and Journalism in the United Kingdom* which mentioned that the emergence of the internet, like teletext which had gone before, has provoked speculation about the impending death of print, and one can see why this new medium might in the future pose a threat to the traditional mean of dissemination of news and journalism.

Moreover, Thomas A. McCain and Jeanine Warisse Turner (1999 : pp. 195-206) published many pieces of writing about Teaching Mass Communication and Telecommunication which support this research relevantly. They mentioned that the traditional media forms that are television, radio, newspaper, and films have already expanded to encompass cable television, videotape, multimedia computers, and computer networks. These changes in media form are also transforming the way content is produced and received. The convergence in new media technologies is creating exciting and challenging



possibilities of how the mass media and the processes of mediated communication can be taught and understood.

## 2. Online Journalism Modules in the United Kingdom

From my research, online journalism modules have been being added to journalism curricula since the 2000 and about 60% of the universities in the United Kingdom which have provided journalism education have already run online journalism courses. Some of these universities have put online journalism into their curricula for only a couple of years whereas some other universities have included 1 or 2 online journalism module/s either as compulsory or optional courses for more than 10 years.

In addition, it is found that some universities which have long provided journalism programs, have offered only 1 course on online journalism while some universities which have just started with the courses in this field have had 2 modules on online journalism in their curricula. For example, a university which began journalism teaching in 1997, has 1 course while another one which started the curriculum in 1999, runs 2 courses. A university where the program was newly introduced in 2006 has also opened 2 online journalism courses.

In other words, the addition of online journalism among universities varies depending on their policies, personnel, and readiness. This can be clearly seen from the interviews taken with lecturers where they have stated that they would like the university to put more investment in infrastructure and staff development.

## 3. Theoretical part

For the theoretical part of journalism, most lecturers have chosen the old and new media topics as the most significant and reporting and writing news as the second most important topics. This may be because the introduction of online journalism into the curricula started during the time of the transformation of the media from old to new. Students, therefore, should be aware of the difference between the old and the new and their evolution.

## 4. Assessment Part

For the assessment course sections, the lecturers have the students complete projects in which all the theoretical lessons have to be applied in order to gain direct experience from real practice. In some universities, after the students complete the theoretical subjects, there is a separate continual course specifically to assess their skill practices in conducting project work as in a university whereas some other universities have their students trained outside in order to fulfill their skills before graduating.

This has to be done in accordance with many persons who specify that the project part is aimed at providing skills practice for some subjects that require practical reviews so that the courses will be evaluated accurately and appropriately.

Richard Dimbleby and Graeme Burton (1990, pp. 83–84) wrote in **Teaching Communication** that it depends on the requirements of a particular course; if group work and group assessment is possible, then group projects can be a means of developing group dynamics skills as well as research and production skills. So long as such traps are avoided, communication project work has many advantages. It provides opportunities

for developing a range of communication skills and for applying principles of communication. The student can learn about the realistic use of resources (technologies, time, people), planning, negotiation, interviewing, research, designing and administering questionnaires, meeting deadlines, working with other people, and developing presentation skills.

As Thomas A. McCain and Jeanine Warisse Turner (1999 : pp. 195-206) wrote about Teaching Mass Communication and Telecommunication that the students' participation helps them to understand a variety of communication principles. Learning and practicing media skills are essential for all students of media.

Furthermore, David French and Michael Richards (1994 : pp. 83-100) wrote about the practical in media studies in *Media education across Europe : Theory, practice and market forces in Britain : A case of relative Autonomy* that to begin with, practical work had meant the exercise of hands-on skills in media work, particularly with audiovisual technology but also perhaps in journalism. 'Research' had been the stately pursuit of intellectual inquiry. But during the 1980s this changed. Partly as a way of adapting to worsening staff-student ratios without resorting to an unrelenting diet of large lectures, project work, often in groups, became a normal part of student programs. The subject of such projects were small-scale research topics carried out to tight deadlines. In other words, academic imperatives had redirected student work towards a form which replicated 'practical' in the media industries, whether program research for television or market research for advertisers.

## 5. Basic Skill and Newer Skill

Most lecturers agree that after completing online journalism module(s), the students should possess basic journalism skills such as reporting and writing news. This is relevant to the results of the analysis of the course syllabi that most lecturers mark the topics of reporting and writing news as the first priority in order that the students will be able to produce good work which is at the heart of the profession.

In addition, most lecturers also share the opinion that the work of journalists for both the printing press and online media requires the same basic skills. Online journalists, however, need some newer skills to work with different types of media such as skills in using modern technology to present stories through suitable media.

What most lecturers have taken as one of the necessary skills for online journalists is having knowledge of and ability in producing multimedia such as audio video to present information/a story.

The findings from the interviews and the content analysis of the course syllabi are that almost all of the universities have had lecturing topics and some parts of web site subject that are relating to news multimedia. For assessment, the multimedia production are all evaluated in the project and portfolio management.

## Conclusion

According to this research results, the development of modern technologies has played a significant role in the working field of journalists and journalism teaching and learning at universities had to be modernized accordingly. Sixty percent of the universities in the United Kingdom which



provide journalism education have already run online journalism courses. Most of the topics which online journalism's lecturers provide in their syllabi are the difference between old and new media and also basic journalism skills, reporting and writing news. Moreover, they also added new skills which are necessary for journalistic working in this transformation period like making multimedia for news. At the end of the course, the students were assessed by undertaking projects.

These can be Online Journalism module pattern to develop more appropriate and modern teaching materials for the delivery in Thailand. Moreover, in others countries around the world which the framework of teaching Online Journalism are not yet established can take this advantage from the findings.

## Suggestion for Further Research

Additional data on the learners' part concerning the present teaching and learning and the obtained skills for their profession as well as the data on the part of employers concerning their expectation should be collected to have complete information from all parts for further study.

## Suggestions for Applying the Results

1. According to the results of the 2 parts of the research, it is obvious that an essential skill for online journalists is applying technology to news presentation. Therefore, it is crucial that lecturers need to include the subject in their teaching.
2. At present, as convergence in media increases, university curricula should be modernized in response to the demands of the working professionals.

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