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Going digital, not dying out: how universities are uniquely placed to teach digital journalism survival skills

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Abstract

With people showing a preference for accessing news via websites, social media platforms and mobile applications, news organisations have increased their focus on digital production. This has led to calls for journalism programmes in universities to keep pace or face obsolescence. But whilst there is agreement over the need to embed digital journalism in the curriculum, there is little guidance on how this should be done in an environment

where news providers have widely different and ever-evolving digital strategies. How can journalism schools meet the needs of industry, when industry itself has not settled on what those needs are? This study addresses that question by considering the views of digital editors from a range of the UK's leading broadcasters and publishers. The interviewees identify digital practices they have in common, but also emphasise the importance of teaching the fundamentals of journalism and that the critical thinking skills fostered in universities, help students thrive as digital journalists.

KEYWORDS: digital journalism, news, social media, education and universities.

Introduction

Digital journalism was defined in the early years of this century as 'the use of digital technologies to research, produce, and deliver (or make accessible) news and information to an increasingly computer-literate audience' (Kawamoto, 2003, p.4).

It was acknowledged that this definition was a 'moving target', as changes in technology and the conceptualisation of journalism would lead to changes in how we understand the term. A study by Columbia University into the commercial challenges associated with digital journalism, showed this to be the case, as they asserted that 'hand-held devices and tablets' (Grueskin et al, 2011, p.4) should be included in the definition, to make clear that we are not limiting ourselves to journalism published online and viewed via a desktop computer. This is a worthwhile clarification given that in the UK, mobile phones surpassed computers as the primary device for accessing digital news in 2017 (Newman et al, 2019, p.68). Any contemporary definition of digital journalism must also acknowledge the significance of social media networks as a major gateway to news. In the USA, 46% of the population use social media as a news source, whilst in the UK the figure has levelled out at 40% (ibid, p.69). In both countries, digital access to news (online and social media combined) is now more popular than any legacy medium (TV, radio or print).

The impact of digital technologies on the work of journalists has been quantified by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. In their survey of around 700 UK journalists, 98% said that social media had changed the way they work (Thurman et al, 2016, p.36). In some cases, this has led to print, TV and radio journalists adding new approaches to the ways they have traditionally gone about their jobs. But it has also led to the rise of new roles focused on creating stories for websites, mobile applications and social networks. Gradually, production focus is moving away from legacy media to digital platforms: 'Social media teams are increasingly viewed as (1) the first stage in the customer acquisition funnel and (2) a means of creating a culture that puts audience impact and digital optimisation first. Their role has grown from simply ensuring content is optimised for specific platforms to originating content tailored for those destinations' (Kueng, 2017, p.26).

This has implications not only for news organisations, but those who shape the minds of future newsmakers: 'A shared sense of urgency in the industry and the academy is essential to ensure that today's and tomorrow's journalists have the skills to create journalism that is both meaningful and economically successful' (Finberg and Klinger, 2014, p.2). Jonathan Baker, the former Director of the BBC College of Journalism, agrees. In his provocative essay 'Get digital or die', he calls on university teachers to furnish journalism students with skills relevant to the digital world, or risk their programmes becoming obsolete (Baker, 2016).

But whilst there is agreement over the need for journalism programmes in universities to embrace digital practices, there is little guidance available on how this should be done. News providers themselves have divergent and ever-evolving digital strategies, often forced upon them by rapid technological change and the dominance of third-party platforms. How can journalism schools meet the needs of industry, when industry itself is not sure what those needs are?

The problem was encapsulated by Piet Bakker (2014), who identified four growing areas of digital journalism activity (technical, community, content and commercial) in an article on how the skills journalists need and the tasks they perform have changed fundamentally in recent years. In his conclusion, he acknowledges the challenge this creates for journalism educators: 'What is striking in the technical qualifications required of new employees is the diversity and the depth of the skills requested. It is, however, impossible for any journalist to master them all, let alone for any J-school to teach all these skills in depth' (ibid, p.603).

A further challenge is that existing studies on the impact digital media has had on the work of journalists are of limited assistance. Many concentrate on theory (Steensen and Ahva, 2015), asking whether the normative values of journalism are the same in a digital environment. Others focus on how social media and other forms of digital production and dissemination have changed the way reporters experience their role (Nielson, 2016). Research that does assess the impact on practice, and that is therefore of particular use to those teaching practice in higher education, often deals with the specific use of a certain digital platform or process by a narrowly defined group of journalists, such as foreign correspondents use Twitter (Cozma and Chen, 2013) or the pivot to vertical video in local TV newsrooms in the USA (Canella, 2017). These studies are insightful but focus on a thin sliver of the digital production spectrum, whilst educators need a comprehensive overview.

Research Questions and Methods

The main aim of my research is to address the question of how journalism educators can teach digital practices, despite the many obstacles in their way. The objective is to help journalism schools develop curricula that meet the needs of modern newsrooms by working towards a typology of digital news skills; identifying and categorising new practices that are common to newsrooms in the UK, whatever their legacy medium, demographics or geographical scope. The research also seeks out any other factors in industry or the academy, outside a typology, that might aid educators in their digital endeavours. The following research questions are derived from these considerations:

For students intending to become digital journalists, what are the factors considered most important in terms of developing their practice, as identified by those working in the industry?

What might a typology of digital journalism practices look like, based on the insights gained from disparate UK news organisations?

Can approaches to teaching digital journalism be identified that are not susceptible to the caprices of technological change and the algorithms of third-party platforms? What are the fundamentals valued by industry?

This is a qualitative study that has the aim of identifying common digital journalism practices amongst UK news providers. The findings are based on seven semi-structured, in-depth interviews with digital editors from a cross-section of the news media; broadcast, print and online. The participating organisations are vice.com (UK), BBC Yorkshire, Financial Times, Sky News, JPI Media (formerly Johnston Press), ITV News and Bauer Media. Between them, these organisations represent commercial and public service broadcasters, digital natives and newspapers. Some interviewees work for individual titles, whilst others are employed by media groups. The sample covers national, regional and local production, whilst reflecting a wide range of regulatory models (see Table 1).

Organisation	Media of origin	Geographical coverage	Finance model	Governance model
Vice.com (UK)	Online	National	Commercially owned and funded, for-profit	Self-regulation

BBC Yorkshire	TV and radio	Regional and local	Publically owned and funded, non-profit	Public service broadcaster, Ofcom regulations
Financial Times	Newspaper	National	Commercially owned and funded, for-profit	Self-regulation
Sky News	TV	National	Commercially owned and funded subscription TV, for-profit	Non-public service, Ofcom regulations
JPI Media	Newspaper group	National, regional and local	Commercially owned and funded, for-profit	Voluntary regulation with IPSO
ITV News	TV	National and regional	Commercially owned and funded, for-profit	Public service broadcaster, Ofcom regulations
Bauer Media	Commercial radio group	National and local	Commercially owned and funded, for-profit	Non-public service broadcaster, Ofcom regulations

Table 1: Key characteristics of participating news organisations

The aim is to reveal what varied representatives of the industry have in common and where they diverge, to gain an understanding of the sector as a whole. As the number of interviews conducted is small, the findings are not generalisable. However, as the research questions suggest, this can be seen as an exploratory study, examining how a better understanding of professional practice can inform the teaching of digital journalism in higher education.

Digital editors were selected for interview because they are ideally placed to understand both the strategies and aspirations of their employers, as well as having daily, first-hand experience of how digital journalism is produced on the newsroom floor. The detail of how journalists work, and with what tools, is important to this study and is the kind of information that an executive might not possess, as their focus is on policy rather than implementation. This notion was reinforced as I discovered in the process of pursuing suitable contacts that some digital executives in news are from marketing or commercial backgrounds, rather than journalism.

Themes were identified through the systematic analysis of the interview transcripts and guided by the research questions, applying Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006) approach. First, I searched for anything interesting and relevant in the responses of the digital editors. Repeated, contradictory and unique points were identified and categorised, using the emergent coding approach. I then organised the categories I had discovered into the topics that are highlighted below in the findings and discussion sections. I first present findings related to the perceptions of different digital platforms and their affordances; I then turn to my suggestive typology of digital journalism skills.

Findings

Digital platforms used by the news organisations

There is a large degree of conformity in the digital platforms utilised by the broadcasters and publishers who took part in the study. They all have their own websites and a presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Despite a small dip in usage from its highpoint four years ago, the Reuters Institute says that in 2019 Facebook 'remains by far the most important social network for news' (Newman et al 2019, p.10), both globally and in the UK (p.69). This is reflected in the perceptions and actions of the digital editors, who all make their Facebook accounts a priority:

> *'Facebook is the big one, absolutely the big one, where most of the audience comes from.'*
>
> *(JPI Media)*

'There's an old saying, which does hold relatively true at the moment which is Facebook is for audience, Twitter is for influence; and they do two very different things.'

(BBC Yorkshire)

Reuters Institute research also shows that whilst usage of Instagram is growing in the UK, it's had relatively little impact on the population's journalism consumption habits, with only 4% of those surveyed saying that they regularly use the social network for news (Newman et al 2019, p.69). This perhaps explains the ambivalence towards Instagram from the interviewees. The Financial Times is encouraged by its initial experimentation with the platform:

> *Instagram is actually the one that I think is most interesting and unique for us, in that it had in the past three years the highest percentage of growth in terms of followers and engagement. And it is one for which we also probably create the most bespoke content. It's also the one which we're beginning to actually be able to drive traffic back to the FT.com.*

Yet others, such as *Sky News*, reported that re-direction to its own website and therefore its own revenue streams, was precisely the problem: 'it's quite difficult to drive volume and referral traffic from Instagram.'

Which leads us onto SnapChat, which has similar limitations to Instagram when it comes to referrals and persuading its users to engage with journalism (Newman et al 2019, p.18). This seems to be the most divisive platform. The conformity seen elsewhere does not apply to SnapChat, with *vice.com* and *Sky News* being the only organisations from our seven to routinely publish on the network. Access to a younger audience is the chief attraction: 'Snapchat is actually something we're putting a big focus on just because it's growing such a huge audience that we didn't have before which is the sort of 13 – 19 age range' (vice.com). For *Sky News*, there are also the seeds of commercial success:

> *Tech platforms, to varying degrees of success, are out to make some money for themselves and for us as well. So that's another reason we're on Snapchat, you'll find advertising in our new Snapchat shows, when appropriate. Obviously some of the subject matter is not appropriate. So I understand why those publishers are not on there. We're on there to experiment, to reach a new audience, and make some money really.*

Messaging services were hardly mentioned by participants, with BBC Yorkshire alone pointing to some experimentation with WhatsApp. It is a similar story with aggregators, though both Sky News and vice.com have associations with Apple News and Sky also provide content for Flipboard.

As the aim of this report is to help journalism teachers navigate the uncertainties of digital production, it seems that one thing we can hang our hats on is that some platforms are particularly highly valued by disparate news producers in the UK. Other social networks are experimented with, but it seems that Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube have primacy when it comes to producing and disseminating stories.

Towards a typology of digital journalism skills

Having established the platforms utilised by the interviewees, we discussed the story formats that they create for their digital outputs and the associated skills required by practitioners. I wanted to know, what do digital journalists have to be able to do and what do they need to understand that differs from the competencies familiar to reporters working in TV, radio or print? Is it possible to create a typology of digital journalism practices that apply to news organisations that vary considerably in origin and character? This would help guide journalism educators towards a focused, manageable and durable approach to teaching digital journalism practice. The contributors came up with a wide range of answers, but a number of activities recurred. In this section, I will highlight and elaborate on the practices that were referenced by three or more of the seven participants, to give an indication of the most widely used approaches and therefore work towards a digital journalism typology.

1. digital video production

Representatives from the majority (six) of the participating news producers volunteered that making digital videos is a key ability. These 'short form videos', as they were also called, are familiar to mobile users who generally watch but do not listen to video content (Patel, 2016), and follow the story aided by captions. Sky News described some of the key differences between producing videos for digital platforms and traditional TV production:

> *Our video strategy, which is born out of metrics and insight, is that your mobile phone isn't just a smaller screen for television, and audience behaviour is different, they want to consume in square or vertical, they want to consume with the sound off and so they need subtitles and captions. And they don't consume for as long a period of time, so when a typical TV VT might be three to four minutes, a digital video will be 60 to 90 seconds. We often invert the storytelling so that you don't get the reporter leading like you do in a TV VT, you get the real human element of the story straight at the top and then we might revisit it later. So that's where*

our digital specialists come in.

The FT adds that from their experiences, the best performing digital videos are 'on one specific story or one specific topic'. Overall, it was clear from the participants that they have learnt a lot about digital video production in recent years, with the differences in story structure, aesthetic appeal and an understanding of the expectations of the audiences being key factors.

2. social listening

In varying ways, the FT, BBC Yorkshire, ITV News, vice.com and JPI Media, described the importance of social listening. Through different approaches, they tap into comments and social media communications as a way of developing story ideas and editorial strategy, as well as forming a closer relationship with their audience. The FT employs what it calls a 'community manager' whose specific role is to build engagement through comments:

> *We consider commenting, and the conversations that take place in comments, as being part of our journalism and increasingly most news publishers are. And there are ways in which we can even use those communities to feed our journalism. This is a whole subgenre of journalism which didn't exist before comments.*

This echoes a study by Chen and Pain that describes how journalists have warmed to the idea of interacting with online comments as a way of 'fostering mutually beneficial connections with the audience' (2017, p.876).

BBC Yorkshire describes a similar practice for harnessing views and experiences shared on social networks:

> *We do lots about social listening, which you could say is harvesting content from social media so we don't have to get off our arses. I'd say it's different; I'd say it's harder to get to the pub these days and due to the smoking ban they're slightly emptier so those conversations don't happen there anymore. In local news groups, people do speak freely and tell amazing stories without even knowing it.*

This digital editor goes on to give an account of a story developed from a Facebook group called Leeds Face, where someone posted about their dad passing his driving test for the first time at the age of 79, so he could drive his wife, who had cancer, to hospital appointments. As *ITV News* put it: 'we often do pick up stories that are making waves on social media but haven't yet crossed over into news'. Embracing digital audience interaction and then responding to it in a way that informs your editorial output, is one clear addition to the reporter's tool bag.

3. repurposing legacy media for social media.

As with social listening, five interviewees (*JPI Media, BBC Yorkshire, ITV News, Sky* and *Bauer)* cited the ability to repurpose legacy media output for digital platforms as a key competence. Participants explained that in the early days of digital production, materials would more-or-less be copied and pasted verbatim from their native platform into a digital posting. So, for instance, whatever words might have been written as the cue for a story that appeared in a TV news bulletin, would be the same words used in a Facebook post that also incorporated a made-for-TV video of the same story. Now, that same TV content is deconstructed and rebuilt with social media and mobile sensibilities in mind.

At *Sky News*, this is a specialist job; they employ seven people whose principal role is to repurpose TV footage for digital videos. At the *JPI Media*, the conversion process requires collaboration: 'The print team will start the basics of creating the story for the web based on what they've written for the paper and changing it slightly. Then the digital team take it to another level and hopefully use it in the right way at the right time on the right platform.' It seems that at the moment, a large proportion of digital output, not least video, is based on material originally captured for a legacy medium. *BBC Yorkshire* estimates the following in terms of the source of video uploaded to its digital platforms: 'I'd say at the minute 70% TV, 20% self-shot and 10% UGC (user-generated content).' That could change, as newsrooms increase their understanding of the differing demands of a social media audience. *ITV News* are looking to do more of their own filming and where possible, ask TV colleagues to pick up shots that specifically meet the needs of digital production.

4. explainers.

Four interviewees (*JPI Media, FT, ITV News* and *BBC Yorkshire*) extolled the popularity of 'explainers'; video or textual articles that supply the audience with key background information that places a developing news story in context. It is the signature format of USA digital native *Vox* (The Economist, 2014) and its success has been noted across the Atlantic. *JPI Media* sees this as a revival of public information journalism that is 'being brought into the digital age more and more'. *ITV News* have developed a similar approach to *Vox*:

Recently we've been doing fronted explainers, as we call them, where we have a presenter down the barrel talking and leading the audience through. And then experimenting with graphics and overlays and archive and so on. And hopefully engage them and take them through the story. We call it Evergreen Content. So a Brexit explainer…we can reshare that and repost that most likely for some time to come.

The *FT* reports that such explainers 'tend to do very well on social'. Again, it seems that this is a format that is here to stay and therefore an approach to news journalism that university students should study and practise.

5. analytics

The representatives of *vice.com, JPI Media, FT* and *BBC Yorkshire* highlighted the need for their staff to be aware of audience metrics and how to use analytical tools. The *FT* argues that the essence of analytics is 'being able to understand the degree to which a story only gets better when it's informed by an understanding of an audience and audience impact.' The *BBC Yorkshire* view on analytics is similarly positive:

We are no longer throwing our line in the river and seeing what hits it; we can to a certain extent, not predict, but we can see where we performed and didn't, and improve that performance. That's not to say the story changes; it may be that our method of telling the story changes.

The influence of audience metrics on editorial judgements seen here is in line with the findings of many previous studies, such as Tandoc's work on analytics and the journalist's role as gatekeeper (2014).

6. social storytelling

The final category captures a range of activities and skills that recognise the need to tell stories in different ways for a social media based audience. Three interviewees (vice.com, FT and JPI Media) talked about social storytelling specifically, though BBC Yorkshire, ITV News and Sky News had already commented on the way in which digital videos are created in a way that takes into account how and why people use social networks. For vice.com, the text that's written to accompany the post is key:

There's a huge skill to being able to sell a story basically on Twitter or Facebook because people are inundated with stories, so [the aim is] to really stand out from that. We always try to avoid clickbait because that's the worst but you have to do something that's going to pull people in and it is a real skill…So it could be going through just having an eye for what is either the most shareable piece of information in the article or the most enticing something where you read just a snippet of it and go, 'Oh I want to find out more about that.'

As well as writing in a way that will entice readers to look at your post and perhaps click on a link to your website, the *FT* has created a new visual format to attract attention on social networks. They publish what they call a 'social card' across all of their social media accounts:

It is a graphic made for social media that will have some kind of designed piece of information that flags up the value of the story and has some call to action to actually click on that story. So it is really designed for social, it's meant to have all the information in one card, hence the reason it's called a social card, and so either tell a story or deliver a piece of information within that card. So it's often a graphic or a chart. If it's a graphic it will be some striking image with a bit of text, and if it's a chart it'll have essentially a self-contained story within that chart.

Whether using words, pictures or both, digital platforms demand that journalists think in new ways about their audience and the social environments in which they meet them.

7. the rest and the (currently) disregarded

The following practices were each mentioned twice; live streaming, developing a social media following, data journalism and podcasting. However, the audience's appetite for the latter is clearly increasing according to the latest Reuters Institute research:

In the UK, younger age groups, who spend much of their lives plugged into smartphones, are four times more likely to listen to podcasts than over 55s – and much less likely to listen to traditional speech radio. Under 35s consume half of all podcasts despite making up around a third of the total adult population.

(Newman et al 2019, p. 29)

Other competencies identified by only a single interviewee were creating listicles, live blogging and gamifying stories through quizzes. It was also interesting to hear many of the digital editors explain how they have experimented with VR and 360 degree storytelling, but none of their organisations have taken it forward as an on-going format. JPI Media explained that it is, 'not really in the core of the business at the moment'. It's a similar story at *BBC Yorkshire*, whose digital editor suggests that not every form of digital media is going to work for journalism:

> *I think, when there is a new tool out such as 360-degrees we rush to all use it, and then what you see after two months is a real recession in the use of it and then it comes back intermittently. And the reason for that is we like new things as journalists, and we can use them. However what we don't do is identify what advantage they give us or what's good for the audience.*

But *ITV News* said that they have 'done a few 360 videos, as in crowd shots, where it's lent itself to that', and might find more uses for it and VR in the future.

Awareness rather than mastery

Linking into the final point above about VR and 360 degree production, it was stated by the majority of interviewees (*BBC Yorkshire, ITV News, vice.com* and *FT*) that they expected employees and prospective employees to have an 'awareness' of the very latest developments in digital media. But they do not require reporters to be able to produce work in every conceivable format, nor to have mastered every skill relating to digital production. Comments made about Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) techniques exemplify this:

> *There is an expectation of at least basic understanding of how to tag your articles, relevant keywords in the title or the subtitle, but yeah I'd say that's kind of a minor concern, that's more handled by, at least in our company, by social media department and the marketing department rather than the journalists themselves.*
>
> (vice.com)

Likewise, *BBC Yorkshire* did not see SEO as a core skill for digital journalists: 'They need to know that SEO exists and a basic ten-point SEO list, and they might spend five hours doing it but I'm not convinced they need to know the bells and whistles of SEO to be honest with you.'

That thought is echoed by the *FT* whose digital editor does not expect students to become polyvalent: 'we are asking [for] an awareness, if nothing else, of not how to produce everything, but of how to translate journalism into being relevant to whatever publications, platforms are necessary.' This is a key point that speaks directly to the central question explored in this study; it seems that one of the secrets to teaching digital is that we do not need to cover every facet of practice in depth, so long as students have a wide-ranging knowledge of what is happening in the industry, along with a willingness and capacity to learn.

Journalism fundamentals still valued

It was notable that many interviewees chose to go back to journalism basics when asked what they wanted from graduates, despite the preceding conversation focusing on digital production. Some of the editors made the point that new digital practices can be taught pretty readily on the job, whereas the essentials of journalism cannot. What is more, as *JPI Media* summed up, the widely shared view was that whilst the platforms have changed, in many respects, the fundamentals of the job have not:

> *People have this kind of misconception that when digital journalists are hired, or when people go work in digital, that means they don't need to do any proper reporting anymore, you're just digital, all you do is BuzzFeed style listicles, you don't have to do any journalism. Which is not true. In fact, we still do a lot of journalism where we need to interview people, we need to make sure it's legally safe, we need to check with police statements, verify people who have tweeted something and check it's true, stand things up. So there's still a lot of the traditional journalism even in the production of digital articles on the web.*

A variety of traditional journalism skills that underpin all forms of reporting, including digital practices, came to the fore through the interviews. I have detailed below the four skills that were most frequently mentioned (at least four times) to give an indication of the editors' priorities and to explain why these aspects of a journalist's role are still held in such high regard.

1. News sense

All seven digital editors identified the need for journalists to be curious about the world around them and to follow-up on that curiosity by judging whether an event or circumstance should be reported on. No matter what the medium or what their role might be, journalists have to know a story when they see one:

> *Because no matter how digitally first and whizzbang-ly data driven and visually driven and mobile driven and socially driven our journalism is going to become, or indeed our audience will become, at the heart of a successful piece of journalism is always a great story.*
>
> (Financial Times)

The digital-native vice.com agrees, saying that 'story is key still' and that it will always take precedence over 'whether it's written or a 360 live video'. It was noticeable throughout the interviews that the editors felt that a reporter's ability to capture the essence of a story was demonstrated in their headline writing and the wording of social network updates.

2. Writing

The importance of this skill was also unanimously agreed upon and something that the contributors were clearly passionate about. They stressed again that no matter the medium, platform or format, being able to write is essential:

> *Writing is number one for me. I'm probably biased because of my background [in newspapers] but I feel it feeds into everything else…when we were recently recruiting we had a lot of very talented people in video but struggling with the writing and it's a unique skillset now we're after. We're after strong writers. And I think that goes on to video because if you can write well you can write good scripts, you can write the article to accompany the video. You can sell it the best way you possibly can on social platforms. So we definitely still need strong writers.*
>
> (ITV News)

> *The written word is really important. Whether you work in TV, radio, print or digital, the written word is still the way that stories are built. Writing to script is a skill. Writing a proper news story is a skill… So learn the principles of writing and be able to demonstrate that you can use those principles.*
>
> (Sky News)

3. Filming

Six of the interviewees volunteered that they believed it is important that journalists know how to film. This is hardly surprising coming from our broadcasters, but it was interesting to see that representatives from organisations with a publishing background agreed. *JPI Media* touched on the fact that whilst the recording devices in use vary greatly within the industry, other aspects of the video producer's role do not: 'If you understand shooting, whether you're using a broadcast camera or a mobile phone, the principles remain the same.'

4. Interviewing

Sky News want journalists who can follow up on their curiosity by having 'an ability to ask questions based on that curiosity and have the confidence to do it in person or on the phone.' Confidence is an issue because of the particular challenges associated with interviewing:

> *If you're going to be a journalist in news you are going to have to ask some awkward questions of people who don't want to answer your questions, and that might be people who are bereaved, or it might be slippery politicians, or it might be criminals. But your job is to ask those questions and so you need to develop a persona which will enable you to do that.*
>
> (Sky News)

Having the confidence to carry out interviews is clearly an issue, particularly for early career journalists. As BBC Yorkshire puts it: "They need to be not scared to leave the office. I know this sounds stupid but we see journalists increasingly who work in the office". Altogether, four of the seven digital editors talked about the importance of interviewing and the social skills that enable a reporter to secure contributions and make the most of their opportunities.

5. The rest

The following attributes were cited a couple of times each: a knowledge of media law; ability to submit Freedom Of Information requests and an understanding of providing balance through counterpoints in reporting. Single mentions were given to following a style guide, working a beat, learning how to pitch ideas, fact checking and shorthand.

Coping with constant change

An observation shared by the majority of interviewees (*JPI Media, ITV News, Financial Times* and *BBC Yorkshire*), was that a major challenge they face as digital journalism leaders is keeping up with the pace of change. They echoed previous research findings outlined in the introduction to this article by explaining that technological advances and the power of third party platforms were the leading drivers behind this constant state of flux. *ITV News* explained how the velocity of evolution within digital journalism is unprecedented in the industry:

> *It's a blessing and a curse really working in digital in that it's forever changing. With TV formats, if you'd have watched a bulletin from 50 years ago to now you wouldn't see a massive difference. Maybe one's black and white and one's colour but you wouldn't see a massive shift, whereas digital in the last couple of years we've shifted considerably and I think we continue to and every time we bring something new in or try a new format we know at the back of our mind we'll be changing this again in a few months' time. So it's great and exciting in that way and we have to keep developing and moving to try and stay ahead of the curve but*

sometimes it's hard to keep up.

JPI Media gives us an insight into how the pressure is experienced on the newsroom floor:

> *We have emails going out constantly to our staff saying this has been changed now, would you do it this way. This has been changed. This is changing from next week, etc. Constant adapting. It can be quite tiring in a way, constantly changing to the way social media platforms are changing.*

Newsroom managers, such as our digital editors, not only have to cope with the stress that they feel as a consequence of ever-changing strategies, skills and practices, but have to bring their teams along with them. The head of digital news at the *FT* suggests that one approach that seems to work is to recruit reporters who bring with them the ability to adapt: 'we are asking [of candidates] that there be evidence of awareness and a willingness to be able to be a quick study or a good student of whatever a newsroom's need is.' The desirability of being a good learner and somebody who can handle or even thrive on change, suggests that graduates of journalism schools in universities are well-placed to succeed as digital journalists.

Discussion and Conclusions

The core skills of journalism (nose for a story, ability to research and verify information, interviewing, ability to write/shoot/audio record a report etc.) remain the same in the digital age. In fact they seem to be particularly highly valued because they are fundamental to the role and transcend medium, platform or format, whilst many aspects of digital production seem ephemeral. As *BBC Yorkshire* put it: 'as we move forward I think we need to equip people to do the old things better.'

But it is also clear that a series of new practices have emerged that are being sustained by a wide range of news producers from varied backgrounds. As a representative sample, the experiences of seven news organisations are inconclusive. However, to see them adopting the same methods despite their great differences in origin, audience and financial structure, suggests it is possible to identify what could be considered some fundamentals of digital journalism practice. The beginnings of a typology has been identified. Conversely, with other production approaches infrequently mentioned or completely overlooked, there may be scope to lighten what can seem like an overwhelming digital workload on both journalists and journalism educators.

Further solutions to the problem of how journalism programmes cover a vast and volatile breadth of digital activity, can be distilled from what our editors had to say. Many emphasised the desirability of raising students' awareness of new practices, formats and genres, rather than filling their time and brains with specific processes, software and skills that they may never use or could acquire on the job. They instead highlighted the importance of being a willing learner who can master change. The majority of our interviewees volunteered that a willingness to learn new practices and acquire new skills was key to success as a digital journalist.

This last item points to the innate advantage that higher education has over other environments for teaching journalism: 'an educator's role is to facilitate the learning process and encourage students to become active agents and the drivers of their own educational experiences' (Larrondo-Ureta and Fernández, 2017, p.10). Our graduates have been taught how to teach themselves and find solutions independently. They have the mental agility and experience to be open and responsive to new ideas and innovation. What the university sector does as a matter of course, seems perfectly in sync with the key underlying characteristic of a successful digital journalist.

Some scholars go further in their depiction of the role journalism teachers in higher education can play in meeting the challenges presented by digital media:

> *Academics, so often external spectators, need to be offered a seat at the table in order to provide the insight and experience that comes from studying these issues in a deeper context and over a longer period.*
>
> (Rottwilm 2014, p.20)

This approach is already in evidence through the work, for example, of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in the UK and the Poynter Institute in the USA. Furthermore, in 2017, the JournalismKX website was launched with the express purpose of bringing together journalists in the UK and academics researching journalism, to encourage collaboration on shared areas of interest and innovation. How these joint ventures feed into journalism education is something that could be further explored.

So the task now is to not only get on top of teaching digital journalism, but to stay ahead by being a part of its evolution. Universities are already well-placed to help the next generation of practitioners cope with

the pace and relentlessness of technologically-driven change. If they can also participate in future developments, journalism schools will understand what is happening from the inside, rather than relying on occasional studies based on short-term, small scale and temporary relationships with news organisations. An appetite for exploration, innovation and continuous study, is shared by the higher education and digital journalism producers. This seems like a solid basis for a close working relationship.

Further research

By identifying common practices, approaches and viewpoints amongst disparate news organisations in the UK, and recognising the special role that higher education has to play in the teaching and development of digital journalism, this study has contributed to a pressing debate for media practice educators. But clearly more can be done to cement, qualify or advance the findings made here. Areas for potential further research include:

A comprehensive survey of digital journalism practices in the UK, to provide a statistically significant gauge of activities and a complete typology;

A study of what it is that journalism educators are teaching, to see where the differences exist between industry and the academy;

Newsroom based ethnographic research, looking at what impact the practices identified have on journalism culture and internal politics.

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