



In search of the story

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Digital online technology has revolutionised the way journalists operate, from sourcing stories to disseminating information. Ann Morgan reports on how UK universities are adapting their courses to help students find the big stories



Main picture
Boxing trainer Freddie Roach speaks to the media

Above
MediaCityUK in Salford Quays, Manchester. The new home of the BBC aims to become a leading international hub for the creative and digital sectors

Below
State-of-the-art technologies such as smartphone and tablet apps are essential components of the modern media marketplace

Teodora Beleaga could never have imagined what would happen during her work placement at a London newspaper last year. While searching social media application Tweetdeck in the newsroom at the *Hampstead & Highgate Express*, the Romanian student came across comments saying that a man with a gun was threatening people nearby. ‘Within an hour I was there reporting everything on Twitter,’ she says. ‘That was my second day on the placement and it got the front page.’

Using Twitter to source and broadcast stories are just two of the skills that Beleaga is learning as one of the first students on City University London’s MA in Interactive Journalism, which launched in September 2011. Designed to reflect the way that digital media, phone technology and the internet are revolutionising journalism in many parts of the world, the course offers a range of innovative modules. These include Entrepreneurial Journalism, which looks at launching new media ventures from websites to smartphone apps, and Online Communities and Content Management.

Data Journalism – in which budding journalists learn techniques to find stories by searching effectively online and analysing electronic banks of information – is one of Beleaga’s favourite modules. ‘It’s about knowing how to dig for the relevant things in a vast morass

[of information],’ she says. ‘That’s the edge we have.’

Online journalism lecturer Gary Moskowitz, who teaches at both City University and the London School of Journalism, believes these technological advances have far-reaching implications. With apps, software and web platforms constantly changing the way that the media and the public interact, he feels his job is as much about encouraging aspiring journalists to adapt their thinking as it is about teaching them the latest multimedia tools.



‘You have to move students away from thinking about themselves as traditional reporters to being more like community curators,’ he says. ‘[This means] involving people in the process and getting readers to contribute their own thoughts and information.’ This desire to involve the public in newsgathering and analysis is clear at many media organisations around the world



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these days. From interactive comments on websites such as the BBC News site, *El Pais* and the *New York Times*, to public open days run by newspapers such as *Liberation* in France, readers and journalists have never been more closely linked.

Time to play

At the website of UK publisher *The Guardian* – which is the world's fifth most read English-language news site – there has been a range of recent developments, including web-chat forums with guest experts and readers' tweets being used on live blogs and as leads for stories. Literary editor

Claire Armitstead, who has overseen the launch of the interactive book group and

a range of collaborative features and weekly podcasts, says it is important for would-be journalists to explore the multimedia tools available and find out what works for them. 'The most important thing is to play,' she says. 'Think of all these new things as your sandpit. Find out what your relationship to it is and your personality within it. Then you'll emerge as a fully formed journalist.'

Laura Garcia, a Mexican student on the University of Kent's highly competitive MA in Multimedia Journalism, agrees that being able to experiment is crucial when training to be a journalist. Having studied an undergraduate media degree back home – where, she says, she was taught 'everything but the journalism' – she was keen to take a course with a more practical approach.

In contrast to the five or so articles she wrote during her four-year first degree, Garcia finds herself

with frequent deadlines on her master's course and sometimes has as little as two hours to prepare a story for broadcast or publication on the Centre for Journalism's website (www.centreforjournalism.com). She believes working against the clock has been a great way for her to develop her skills. 'This is a very secure environment in which to experiment and find your voice as a journalist,' she says. 'I think that's valuable because it's what makes you stand out from the crowd.'

Garcia, who plans to return to Mexico eventually to cover the nation's drug war, particularly values the professional experience of her teachers. Unlike institutions in many other countries, most UK universities do not require lecturers on certain programmes to hold postgraduate qualifications. This means many media training courses are taught by practising or former journalists instead of career academics. 'That was a big reason for me choosing Kent,' she says. 'You learn how to do things from people who've done it before. It's all about the tricks of the trade and I really wanted to learn how people deal with problems and how they've seen journalism change.'

Professor Tim Luckhurst, who founded the university's Centre for Journalism in 2007, is well placed to help with that. A former editor of *The Scotsman* newspaper and holder of two Sony Radio Academy Awards for news broadcasting with the BBC, Luckhurst says the heart of his centre's mission is to equip future journalists for reporting in the digital age. The university even launched its own iPad app in 2010 to showcase the work of students and staff. 'Everything we do is geared towards preparing students for the reality of life in a converged, multimedia world in which they will have to operate across platforms,' he says.

Even with these radical technological changes looking set to spread throughout the world, lecturers and media professionals agree that the essential principles of good journalism remain the same. 'The fundamental skills of getting the truth, verifying the truth, getting the sources, developing the sources, and understanding the background of a story haven't changed,' says Robert Beers, an

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Why study UK media law?

Media law is a compulsory component of many UK journalism postgraduate qualifications. If you are studying a course that is accredited by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) or the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), you will have to study a module on UK media law and sit an exam on it to pass the course.

Training in this area involves learning complex legislation and past UK court cases, as well as keeping up to date with the latest developments governing social media and online journalism.

As the law for journalists varies from country to country, it can be tempting to give media law a miss when you are choosing your course. However, Professor Duncan Bloy, director of international development and lecturer in media law at Cardiff University, believes studying the UK's stance on issues such as libel, privacy, defamation and contempt of court can be very useful for prospective journalists all over the world.

'They are standard concepts up to a point,' he says. 'Every country will have defamation laws and privacy laws – and we ask [international students] to relate this to their own experiences.'

There also seems to be quite a bit of interest in UK media law around the world. Bloy has recently returned from a trip to China, where the UK government is supporting the establishment of a research centre at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, which will compare UK and Chinese media law.

'It was very interesting to hear their perspective,' says Bloy. 'They are very much focused on what we do and they want to take the best from the US and the UK and then try to incorporate those principles into Chinese media law.'

You may even find you enjoy media law. Journalist Daniel Yongung Lee – who works on the Korean English language newspaper *The Korea Herald* – took a career break to study the MA in International Journalism at Cardiff University, and chose media law as one of his optional modules only to discover it became his favourite paper. 'The main reason I chose to come here was to learn about the UK system,' he says. 'There are cultural and social differences depending on which country you are in – and the differences are very obvious between Western countries – but the main ideas are universal.'

award-winning former US journalist and course leader on the MA in International Journalism at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN). 'What's changed is you need to be faster.'

An international story

Now in its eighth year, the programme, which caters almost exclusively to international students, is designed to train the foreign correspondents of tomorrow. It has already had considerable success, with past students going on to work for organisations such as the BBC World Service, Reuters and Al Jazeera.

Beers, who has experience reporting from more than 60 countries, prepares participants for these challenging careers with a thorough grounding in story writing. He also invites his students, many of whom are new to journalism, to compare the way news networks cover stories around the world by looking at a different nation's media every week. 'It's important for them to see how nationalities create a prism for the way the story is reported,' he says. 'So we watch Fox News [in the US] with its Republican-slanted newscast and put it against CBS or NBC or CNN and I ask them where do you see the differences?'

Keen to foster open dialogue, Beers invites his students to consider many of the most controversial issues affecting the industry. Frequent topics for discussion include the phone-hacking scandal, which shook the British tabloid press in 2011 after journalists were proved to have hacked into people's phone messages, and reporting restrictions in countries around the world.

Palestinian student and Chevening Scholar Naela Khalil has found this frank and open approach, both on the course and in the UK media, particularly refreshing. 'In the UK you have lots of opinions and a lot to talk about,' she says. 'The freedom is amazing. People can talk about Rupert Murdoch and phone-hacking because of the law and the ethics of journalism. That's amazing.'

The decision to come and study journalism in the UK was a particularly big one for Khalil. Having worked for 10 years as a



journalist in Palestine, she had won many awards, including the prestigious Samir Kassir Award for Freedom of the Press. When she applied to UCLAN, she faced a lot of questions from relatives, friends and colleagues who could not understand why she would put her illustrious career on hold to become a student again. For Khalil, however, the answer was simple. 'I want to write in English,' she says. 'The challenge is to reach a larger audience in English. UK journalism is like the heart of the world. If you go to Sudan, the US or anywhere you can see the BBC, *The Guardian* or *The Independent*.'

With the broader international awareness that studying international journalism in the UK has given her, Khalil plans to return to work as a journalist in Palestine with a fresh sense of purpose and a new goal. 'I still have my courage but now I have more knowledge,' she says. 'Now I know the way to convince the people in power that we can change our media for the good of the people. After this course I can do it. I will do it.' ■

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