News Literacy for advanced journalism students at Adam Mickiewicz University
Adaptation through innovation

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The main aim of this paper will be to present **changes to the News Literacy curriculum** implemented by Adam Mickiewicz University staff in response to requirements of their audience group. Our **teaching environment is shaped by such factors** as:

- **growing use of digital news media**

According to the surveys made at the beginning of the academic year, in a typical day 80% of our students use mobile phones, tablets or computers 4 or more hours per day. They mainly use the Internet in their homes, schools, but also outdoors and in public transport. What is more, 54% access social media more than 10 times a day and in personal interviews it was suggested that many students from this group are connected constantly. When it comes to news consumption: 56% of them primarily access news via Social Media and 24% via news platforms, 74% regularly read news on the Internet (TV 22%, Radio 14% , Press 14%).

- **heavy audience focus on domestic (Polish language) media and socio-political context**

As it is revealed in introductory interviews with Journalism undergraduate students, just 15% of them follow foreign media (mainly: English language). The rest of our target group is strongly focused on Polish media and national or local sections.

According to Dobek-Ostrowska, the media in Poland "above all the press, strongly focus on political life, and external pluralism and the tradition of commentary-oriented journalism are important" (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012).

- **students with practical journalistic experience**

Moreover, since Winter semester 2015 the course is taught for 3rd year journalism undergraduates (under the name "News Literacy- critical media analysis workshop" with 15 teaching hours), who comprise **an advanced and experienced group of media practitioners.** As it was revealed in the introductory survey, 40% of them spend more than one hour reading and/or watching or listening to news, which gives us the image of the target group who is following the media constantly and systematically. Also 66% strongly agree or agree that by paying attention to different sources of news, we can avoid being misinformed

and 78% strongly agrees or agree that if they take the right actions, they can stay informed. These results reflect a high level of understanding of the importance of critical thinking and of the meaning of the power of information. As a result, initial classes devoted to, among others lessons, the power of information and the relevance of News Literacy run much faster and more dynamically.

Due to the specifics of the teaching group (journalism students), the vast majority, about 89%, have experience working for the media**, in particular:** TV interships (22 persons - over 50%), student media (3 persons) and local press (12 people - 30%) and Internet portals (4 persons) were mentioned.

Taking into account the aforementioned circumstances, as well **as insights from surveys, in-class conversations and final feedback**, we have identified **key teaching requirements** for the successful adaptation of the original curriculum**:**

- More often than not our students are playing a double role in and outside class. They are both media consumers and producers. It's only natural, as they are studying to become media professionals and often have a quite extensive experience of work in media organizations. As the basic News Literacy curriculum is orientated more towards media consumers we have identified a requirement to **remodel class instruction and exercises to benefit nascent media producers.**

- Another important requirement is to **include students' feedback and wider input at every step of the teaching process**. Thanks to that, we have been more responsive towards their needs and expectations. Moreover we could harness their potential and know-how not only as nascent media producers, but also as digital natives to critically assess and improve the curriculum.

- As we worked with a group of digital natives for whom the digital media environment is a natural habitat, it was even more important **to stay on the cutting edge of digital media evolution and include relevant cases in teaching materials**.

- Considering that the News Literacy course is located relatively late in the Journalism and Social Communication undergraduate program (third year, journalistic specialization) it was important **to embed our course in the wider theoretical media studies framework**. Our students already had numerous courses dealing with the academic study of communication, including: Introduction to Communication Theory, Basics of Marketing, Extended Press, Radio and TV workshops, Journalistic Genres,

Techniques of New Media, Journalistic Ethics, Internet Journalism. That is why it was required to show linkages between News Literacy concepts and these previous classes.

- All abovementioned factors created an overarching requirement for the course to include a wider context of both the digital revolution and all forms and examples of the evolution of contemporary media. It includes such trends as post-truth politics, the sharing economy, information security or socialnomics.

- As our teaching team combines extensive scholarly background with teaching experience, we have been able to come up with several innovative approaches to this problem. It includes **interactive skill building** (i.e. through the case study method), **inclusion of a wider context** in which the digital revolution changes society, partially flipping the course through **extensive debate**, etc.

Answering the requirements listed above, we have come up with several new elements to our course:

- More creative class exercises in which students take the role of news producers. A prime example is the POLIN exercise. It is basically a role playing exercise based on a specific media event -- the opening of the Museum of Polish Jews in Warsaw (POLIN). In it, students were divided into groups representing journalists from different media organizations. They have received background information on their target audience and their editors' policy. Their main task was to prepare an outline of this event's coverage for their news organization. The answers posted to the participants included: how will you frame this story? What sources will you use? What's the relevance of the story for your audience? How much context do you need? To complete the exercise they could use the original press kit received from the museum, online sources, materials available in the Faculty's library, as well as contact any suitable expert.

- We have applied peer-learning methods by asking students with practice in journalism to share their experiences with Verification, Independence and Accountability. As the groups expressed a strong need for discussion, we have added a large debate element to the Social Media topic. We have posted three broad questions: Is Facebook another service company or a public utility? Should the authorities have the ability to shut down social media in an emergency? Is it necessary for a state to be sovereign in the XXIst Century for it to have its own intranet? Students have been divided into two groups which have taken turns in defending and opposing the notions.

- Elements of communication theory have been embedded into several modules. For example, the Balance, Fairness, Bias topic has been accompanied by reference to the alternative propaganda model by Chomsky and Herman (E. Herman, N. Chomsky, 1988), which was well received by the students. While presenting the News Drivers topic we introduced elements of agenda setting, faming an gatekeeping theory (reference, as with Chomsky). By this move we have been building on their preliminary knowledge acquired in Communication Theory course.
- In every module we've added additional information on the newest trends in the media environment to go more in-depth into covered topics. One of relevant examples is the Blurred Lines section. Every information neighborhood was accompanied by a corresponding media phenomenon such as: entertainment - infotainment, raw data - data journalism, advertising - advertorial. We were also focused on fact-checking initiatives which are relatively new in Poland.

Taking our lessons learned from the last three years of teaching the course and taking them further, we have come up with an idea for a new form of an examination for the course. We have learned that the classical deconstruction exercise offers to little of a challenge to our students. Moreover, sometimes the grading scale for the source evaluation is not flexible enough to take account of different approaches taken by students. Our guiding idea for next year's examinations is to structure it as a semester long project. We will also borrow some elements from gamificaton handbook.

When we think about this approach we have to start from the observation that our classroom is full of digital natives who, at the same time, are aspiring journalists. So, instead of simply teaching our students we would like to ask them to critically assess core News Literacy concepts and take them further in light of their experiences. In the process we would like to incorporate them into the global News Literacy community and make them sort of ambassadors of our project.

At this stage we propose two concrete forms of examination:

1) a role-playing game in which participants face the need of covering a complicated and controversial event. Students would be divided in teams representing different media organizations, PR companies and parties to the dispute. Each team would have its own set of objectives to achieve in our simulated media environment. By impersonating different stakeholders in this game of news, participants would be able

to apply skills learned during the course and better appreciate the complexities and dilemmas of journalistic work.

2) Research project. In this instance students would work in small groups to study the actual media output from the perspective of key News Literacy concepts (like for example: drivers of news, balance, fairness, bias or blurred lines). They would use both basic quantitative and qualitative research methods to measure and assess the scale and characteristics of phenomena described in our curriculum as they exist in a real media environment. The effects of their work could become a useful resource for further academic research conducted by AMU News Literacy Center.

The choice and composition of the examination format will naturally depend on the character of the student group and time constraints imposed by the program of teaching.

Recommendations for teachers teaching NL or its elements for advanced audiences:
- don't be afraid to teach NL to more advanced target groups, it's worth it! However, you have to adapt it and think out of the box!
- engage and empower your students, let them apply peer-learning and learn from them yourself!
- look for links (theories, concepts, issues) between NL elements and different journalism courses and play with this!

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