

Commentary and course outline

Getting their mojo back: A solutions approach for first-year journalism students

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ABSTRACT

Production skills are critical in multimedia journalism classes. Traditionally taught in a hands-on way, the pandemic forced many teachers to replace in-person multimedia instruction with Zoom sessions and instructional videos. Predictably, students in journalism programs across the country struggled to keep up. This commentary will describe how first-year journalism students at Concordia University were asked to report on “what is working and why” in relation to the pandemic in their home communities. This solutions-oriented shift in the central reporting question positioned students differently in relation to the news they were covering and produced a more personalized, engaged perspective on social impacts of the pandemic.

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The course in question, *Intermediate Multimedia* (JOUR 209), is a first-year workshop designed to introduce students at Concordia University to multimedia journalism and is focused on shooting, writing, editing, and producing several pieces throughout the semester. Offered in the winter term, the course builds on its fall semester pre-requisite, *Introduction to Multimedia* (JOUR 207), which is almost entirely dedicated to technical training on equipment including but not limited to Zoom multi-track recorders, DSLR cameras and professional HD camcorders which are loaned out to students from the Communications and Journalism Equipment Depot. In the Fall 2020 semester, with the depot closed and most classes online, *Introduction to Multimedia* (JOUR 207) focused on mobile journalism training and required students to use their smartphones for news production (or their own DSLRs, if they had one). A dedicated media instructor compiled a list of software, apps, and equipment recommendations. The media instructor also created instructional videos and organized virtual drop-in TA hours for the duration of the semester. Workshops and tutorials for video editing were offered on DaVinci

Resolve (free), Apple Final Cut Pro (\$300 plus at the time) or Flixier (free tier, subscription-based model), and students were able to choose which software they wanted to train on and use. After working on technical skills for several months in the fall semester, *Intermediate Multimedia* (JOUR 209) provides the space for students to continue using all the new equipment and software while shifting focus to editorial values and skills. We have continued to use this model, noting that both courses are very important for our students, and must be constantly revised to make sure that what they learn will be transferable to internship and work opportunities.

There are typically 20-25 students per class in three sections of *Intermediate Multimedia* (JOUR 209). In January 2021, I taught two sections and worked with another professor, Corinne Smith, who taught the third section. For context, at the end of 2020, the university announced that the winter break would be extended by a week, recognizing that “many students are experiencing increased stress and fatigue, caused by the challenges and isolation of studying remotely, as well as feelings of uncertainty about the future...

extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures.” The challenges for us as teachers were obvious: we would need to find a way to re-engage an entire first year cohort of exhausted, demotivated students while still dealing with all the restrictions of the pandemic at the time, which included a lockdown and city-wide curfew in Montreal as of 8 p.m. (anyone out after that time risked a \$6,000 fine). Our work was daunting, considering we were trying to reimagine a journalism production course where students needed to pitch, produce, and report audio, video, and digital stories in their own communities. Thankfully, over the course of the semester the lockdown regulations loosened, allowing students the opportunity to venture out and shoot various aspects of their multimedia projects. Still, everyone seemed completely burnt out and defeated. We didn’t want to ignore the pandemic; this was the story of their lives. But we wanted to change the narrative somehow to see if we could help them become re-engaged and excited about what they were learning.


Our solution was to shift the question around the pandemic to focus on “what is working and why,” in relation to local communities. We based this on some excellent resources posted on the Solutions Journalism Network, in particular an article with the headline “24 Questions to Frame your Solutions Reporting on COVID-19,” which suggested reporters try framing their stories on pandemic problem areas in a different way, and to explore how people were responding to solve specific issues they were facing. We introduced this approach at the beginning of the semester and gave the students a list of suggested questions they could choose from. The idea was for the students to spend a considerable amount of time researching their subject matter, then pitch and produce an audio story, a photo gallery, and a video story to answer different aspects of their chosen question. Finally, they would produce a multimedia website to combine the stories at the end of the semester. Examples of the questions (some of which are in the Solutions Journalism Network article) included: What is working to counter anti-Asian racism? What is working to combat social isolation for seniors? What is working to help people with special needs to access adequate health and safety services/resources? What is working to keep young

children engaged in school? The students proved to be extremely resourceful in seeking out original stories full of inspiring characters. In this case, it seemed that introducing a different, solutions-oriented approach was an effective antidote to the depressing realities of the pandemic at that time.

When the semester was over, students were sent an optional survey to find out how they felt about the way the class was taught. Many said that they appreciated being given an option for a clear framework for their stories during such logistically challenging times. Others noted that researching one question throughout the semester allowed them to dig a little more to highlight different aspects of societal solutions, with the appropriate multimedia treatment. Others indicated that they felt this approach encouraged a more personalized, engaged perspective on social impacts of the pandemic. One student came up with her own question: “What is working to help the Montreal special needs community in the pandemic?” In class, the student explained she was motivated to focus on this community because she “felt it was important to share stories of inclusion during the pandemic,” and that she “felt capable of covering some pretty powerful advocates for the Montreal special needs community, who were working especially hard in this time of global crisis” (classroom communication, April 2021). Another student chose to focus on sports, and his question was, “what is working to support the mental and physical health of athletes during the pandemic?” He said that part of the reason he chose this topic was because as an athlete, he felt part of a forgotten community, and wanted to find more encouragement amidst his own despair (classroom communication, April 2021). Overall, the shift in the central reporting question allowed the students to report and to reflect, something that seemed to help them become more engaged throughout some of the darkest days of the pandemic.

In terms of course delivery, like many of my colleagues, the pandemic period was my first time teaching in an online environment. One of the most significant challenges was to connect with each student in a personal way to make sure none slipped through the cracks. At the beginning, students joined online classes with smiles and their videos turned on, but as the weeks and months

passed, their engagement slipped. When it came time to re-design the multimedia class in January 2021, instead of requiring weekly online participation as a group, I decided to offer each class a mix of asynchronous and synchronous materials and meetings. I prepared readings, annotated PowerPoints, and video lectures that students could access at any time and offered an optional weekly “check-in” on Zoom that occurred during class time. This was extremely effective, and I found that more than half of the class attended the weekly session to discuss the readings, upcoming assignments and troubleshoot any issues they were experiencing with production, theory, or equipment. I found that mixing asynchronous and synchronous materials and meetings worked well because students could pace themselves, absorb the material on their own time and reach out weekly or only for group meetings. I also incorporated three or four smaller online group story meetings that were mandatory and found that students were much

more likely to engage in discussion, peer review and debate when the online sessions were limited to four or five students. This meant that while time spent on course delivery almost doubled, it proved to be worthwhile because the learning outcomes for our students stayed strong. 

Aphrodite Salas (*she/her*) is an associate professor in the Department of Journalism at Concordia University. She is also part of the leadership team for Concordia’s “Electrifying Society,” a \$123M research grant to electrify and decarbonize communities.

REFERENCES

Solutions Journalism (2020, March 19). 24 Questions to frame your solutions journalism reporting on COVID-19. *Medium*. <https://the-wholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/24-questions-to-frame-your-solutions-reporting-on-covid19-fe363525ff7>

SYLLABUS

This course is being offered asynchronously with some mandatory synchronous activities. This means:

- Students can access weekly course content through Moodle at any time of day.
- Students do not have to attend weekly online classes at a set time, although there will be weekly optional group chats via Zoom.
- There are three mandatory story meetings throughout the semester.
- There will also be two mandatory workshops on fighting disinformation, and one final mandatory screening meeting.
- Students are required to keep up with the course content each week, which will involve watching annotated PowerPoint lectures and/or videos and doing weekly readings.
- Students are required to complete assignments and upload each one through Moodle.

COURSE OUTLINE:

Week 1	Introduction to Multimedia
Week 2	Multimedia Frameworks & Solutions Journalism <i>Multimedia Critique Due</i>
Week 3	Researching Stories Story meetings (mandatory, maximum 5 students per group, sign up on Moodle and come with your audio pitch)

Week 4	Interviewing & Audio Script Writing <i>Research Assignment Due</i>
Week 5	Voice Training
Week 6	Photojournalism & Caption Writing <i>Audio Assignment Due</i>
Week 7	Photojournalism continued Visual Journalism: Storyboarding & Story Structure Story meetings (mandatory, maximum 5 students per group, sign up on Moodle and come with your photo gallery pitch)
n/a	Reading Week
Week 8	Visual Journalism: Script Writing <i>Photo Assignment Due</i>
Week 9	Visual Journalism: Script Writing continued Story meetings (mandatory, maximum 5 students per group, sign up on Moodle and come with your video gallery pitch)
Week 10	Troubleshooting Video Assignment & prep for Website Assignment
Week 11	Journalists for Human Rights Workshop, Part I (mandatory online attendance) “Fighting Disinformation through Strengthened Media Preparedness” <i>Video Assignment Due</i>
Week 12	Journalists for Human Rights Workshop, Part II (mandatory online attendance) “Fighting Disinformation through Strengthened Media Preparedness”
Week 13	Final Class Screening with Guest Speaker (mandatory online attendance) <i>Website Assignment Due</i>

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Due Week 2:	Multimedia critique	5 marks
Due Week 4:	Research assignment	15 marks
Due Week 6:	Audio assignment	20 marks
Due Week 8:	Photo assignment	20 marks
Due Week 11:	Video assignment	20 marks
Due Week 13:	Website assignment	20 marks