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Enhancing the Teaching of Web Based Journalism – Setting Up a Pioneering Online News Station

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Preamble

In late 2001 the “dot-com” bubble burst and many web-based media outlets closed. Others severely curtailed their activities and reduced the number of their staff. The surviving Internet news outlets locally were generally offshoots of print publications like the South China Morning Post or Ming Pao – or were non-profit-making. There is also one web news operation run by the Hong Kong SAR Government.

The end of the bubble caused a widespread reassessment of the future role of the Internet in news distribution, and some of the more visionary predictions on this topic were discarded. It appeared that the most common arrangement would be for journalists to produce work which would be offered to the public simultaneously on a variety of platforms, including the Internet. This implied an important change in the implications of the Internet for journalism. Reporters would not develop a new style of reporting to fit the new medium. But editors would need to be able to put copy simultaneously on the page, on the web, and perhaps also on the television screen.

In light of these changes, the project team decided that it would no longer be appropriate to aim for a stand-alone Internet news station, as envisaged in our original proposal. Instead we would aim to broaden the scope of the existing student workshops so that all student works would be published on the net as well as in print. The team also believed that in the new realistic climate, the planned international workshop would not attract the number of participants required for it to fulfill its purpose. It was then decided to replace this with a joint workshop staged with the Department of Journalism and Communication, Nanjing University, one of the best online journalism teaching-learning units in the Mainland.

Abstract

This project aimed to enhance students' ability to deliver their online journalistic work by providing real hands-on experience of running a regular student-run news station with content delivered over the Internet. The project was divided into three stages. In the first stage, a series of web production and design workshops were conducted. There followed a series of lectures delivered by invited practitioners and experts in the field about the implications of IT developments and the future of online media. In the second stage, the existing student publications – *The Young Reporter* in English and the *San Po Yan* in Chinese – developed web-based counterparts regularly published on the Internet. The third stage involved collecting feedback and the dissemination of good practices. A workshop and a symposium on web-based teaching and learning were held with students and teachers from the Nanjing University. Through the training workshops and supportive activities, the project has achieved the purpose of equipping our students with cutting edge knowledge and practical skills.

Keywords

Internet journalism, online news station

Introduction

This project was initially a response to the profound changes in the journalism paradigm introduced by the Internet and other digital innovations during the late 1990s. The project team then believed that future journalists would need to be equipped to work on the web as well as in the more traditional media. Accordingly, the team proposed to run a series of workshops which would pave the way for a major expansion of web-based journalism as a part of the journalism training programme.

Aims and Objectives

The objective of the project was to set up a pioneering online news station addressing the emerging new media environment. The TDG would make it possible for students to produce regular news and other journalistic products on the Internet.

Our aim was to initiate teaching and learning of online journalism in the *Reporting and Editing Laboratory* (courses required for all year-two and year-three journalism major students).

Traditionally, the laboratory courses produce students' own newspapers (for Chinese and English concentrations). The *Young Reporter* and its sister Chinese publication *San Po Yan* have been successfully running two independent versions for 30 years. However, with the increasing popularity of the Internet as the venue for public information, a shift towards web-based mode of journalism laboratory is not only necessary, but also promising. The project thus attempted to achieve several goals:

1. To introduce the new forms of online journalism practice by establishing a student-run news station;
2. To explore alternative way to further reform the current experimental courses, which are mainly designed for print media;
3. To upgrade the knowledge and skills that students will need for future online journalism by inviting relevant experts to give lectures and workshops; and
4. To provide a unique platform for dynamic interaction between industry professionals and journalism students.

Methodology

Project assistants were hired to help students:

1. Set up the framework of the station,
2. Direct the students' news production on the web; and
3. Acquire online journalism skills and know-how techniques.

In the initial stage, they also performed certain editorial duties to exemplify online production practice. As for the advisors of the project, we provided all necessary supervision and assistance in designing the operational structure of the station, engaging in the major tasks of online operation. A number of guest lectures were organised to invite experts in the field to deliver up-to-date knowledge and skills to advance online journalism. The use of outside expertise enhanced the

department's links with the local industry and provided access to high-quality current advice on the skills needed.

Results/Findings

At the end of the project, we believe that the four stated objectives were achieved, though a deliberately modified form in the case of objective. It also appeared that the Department is in the forefront of teaching this kind of journalism in Hong Kong, though in the light of current thinking about the Internet it is no longer quite such a trendy forefront to be in. The project was divided into several stages:

In the first stage, specialists were invited to conduct a series of web production and design workshops, which equipped students with the necessary skills to carry out online publishing.

There followed a series of lectures delivered by invited practitioners and experts in the field about the implications of IT developments and the future of online media.

In the second stage, the existing student publications – *The Young Reporter* in English and the *San Po Yan* in Chinese – developed web-based counterparts regularly published on the Internet and received positive response from the community and the media industry.

The third stage involved collecting feedback and the dissemination of good practices. A workshop and a sharing session on web-

based teaching and learning were held with the students and teachers of Nanjing University. Also, the team held a Symposium, jointly planned with the Nanjing University, on "On-Line Media Development and Journalism Education". The Symposium was very successful, attracting nearly 100 academics, professionals and students (many from other institutions).

Discussion

There are a number of excellent reasons to run this project. Through setting the online news station, students have learnt the necessary skills to undertake online publishing and gained the hands-on experience. Most of the current experimental courses are mainly designed for print media. The project helped to explore the possibilities of course reform and thus contributed to our future pedagogic practice. With the many challenges ahead in the journalism professions, we believe this pioneering project has helped to prepare our students for the ever-changing news media environment. The project has enriched and enhanced learning and teaching with real-life input. Students had the chance to integrate their theoretical knowledge with practical experiences and went through the entire reporting process, from news gathering to publishing/broadcasting on the web. By actively involving in this project, students not only mastered advanced knowledge and skills in web publishing, but also developed better understanding of the fast-paced technological changes. It is believed that this project has enhanced learning and teaching in the long run.

Enhancement on Teaching and Learning

The project provided students with the opportunity to increase their intercourse with and knowledge of an important new branch of the journalism industry through visits in both directions. It enabled students to expand their range of journalistic skills through hands-on experience and extensive practical demonstrations. It enabled us to add a new and permanent dimension to the existing print and broadcast workshops. Specifically, our students have gained several major benefits from this project:

1. In the early stage of online media operation when the practical knowledge was difficult to learn from traditional classroom teaching, the project (via a series of workshops) provided systematic hands-on knowledge and training for our students.
2. In the process of setting up the student online news station, the project supported us to invite several advisers to bring the latest professional skills and operational techniques into our own practice. As a result, students had the opportunity to learn from professionals and current practice.
3. The HKBU and Nanjing University joint symposium on Online Media Development was another important programme in which an in-depth exchange between the two sides further advanced online media teaching and learning culture and opportunity.

In short, the project has provided the chance to let our students be aware of the rapidly changing media technology and its impact on our current teaching mode. Through offering training sessions and supportive activities, the project has achieved the purpose of equipping our students with cutting edge knowledge and practical skills.

Limitations/Difficulties

The main limitation of the project was the fact that it was conceived at the height of the "dotcom" frenzy but by the time the project was up and running the online sector had considerably diminished in size and excitement. The project team believes strongly in the future of journalism on the Internet, but our vision of exactly what that future might be had to be adjusted during the course of the project.

There was no separate feedback for this project. The Journalism Department closely monitored student opinion through the teaching evaluation, a detailed exit survey and numerous informal contacts. Different parts of this project were offered at different times to different students so it was possible to collect from students the useful input which was implemented as the project continued, including requests for more practice and workshops. Informal comments were positive and the outcome in terms of web publishing was extensive and impressive. In that sense, the project was useful and effective.

Conclusion

After more than two years of operation, this project displayed an important way for the Department to meet the challenges presented by technological changes. The project produced substantial and lasting improvements in the practice of teaching and the conduct of the workshop courses. We would like to express our deep gratitude to all parties concerned for their support and encouragement.