Oregon Is On Fire: Teaching Social Media in the Journalism Curriculum During COVID-19

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Abstract
This article covers the journey of teaching an online flipped classroom on new trends in social media to journalism students at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon, based on this author's previous workshop at the 2019 PhDigital Bootcamp at Texas State University. Students at Pacific University took the new social media series online in September 2020, as the Cascade Mountain Range in Oregon caught on fire, the Black Lives Matter protests continued in downtown Portland, the 2020 presidential election between incumbent Donald Trump and Joe Biden culminated and the COVID-19 pandemic in the Portland region began escalating. Readers can observe how these incredibly volatile environmental factors influenced the creation of this online resource as well as how journalism students taking the modules turned their cameras on the evolving crises around them. This case study can offer other journalism faculty facing similar remote-learning obstacles a chance to observe how the flipped classroom model can work for teaching social media. Additionally, the theoretical takeaway from this module series for other journalism educators is the successful pairing of asynchronous lessons with mobile phones for reporting on social media. This serves as an adaptive teaching strategy during the unstable and physical crises of our era, namely COVID-19 and climate change, which have made it difficult for the academic community to attend in-person events.

https://sjmc.txst.edu/innovative-immersive-learning/milab/milabjournal/lemke-oregon.html

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Introduction

This analysis describes the creation of a seven-part, online teaching series of social media skills for journalism students at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon, where I teach journalism as an assistant professor. This pilot social media series is intended as an addition to journalism curriculum on digital media and can present a strong model of the uses of the flipped classroom for other university journalism educators coping with the severe physical hazards of the 2020s, namely COVID-19 and climate change. When external conditions are too dangerous for in-person attendance, this series can be taken at home, with students' own mobile phone and Wi-Fi. Thus, we offer a more flexible journalism pedagogy at a time of great instability in the world.

The Emerging Social Media Skills modules, offered in Fall 2020, were inspired in part by my attendance in the 2019 PhDigital Bootcamp (phdigitalbootcamp.com) at Texas State University, which focused on equipping mass media doctoral students to better teach digital innovation in their curricula.

I share the journey of how the modules were pitched to Pacific University's Center for Educational Technology and Curricular Innovation (CETCI -

https://www.lib.pacificu.edu/teach/cetci/), awarded funding and then offered to a test group of 17 journalism students in Fall 2020. The feedback from students, as well as the subsequent integration of these modules into our existing journalism curriculum, is also analyzed.

This seven-module series is intended to be a supplement to an existing journalism course in digital media, as a potential model for other university journalism curricula. Emerging Social Media modules at Pacific University use a flipped classroom model, where students consume course content asynchronously, and then perform homework outside of class. Many journalism programs in the U.S. are struggling to keep their programs in touch with the changing digital technology used by journalists to report the news (Bright, 2020; Enfield, 2013; Royal, 2020). Thus, the Emerging Social Media Skills modules introduce digital innovation to a curriculum on two levels. First, students are taking asynchronous, pre-recorded lectures as a supplement to an existing core journalism course (Writing for Media, in the instance of our core journalism curriculum at Pacific University), using an innovative flipped classroom model. Second, journalism students are absorbing critical new media skills as part of their toolkit to be competitive among their peers. Adding new media skills to our Journalism and Media Arts curriculum creates more value to a bachelor's degree at this university.

Through an examination of the resulting student projects from Fall 2020, I hope to display the advantages of digital pedagogy in the form of these online modules. The world, and subsequently academia, has entered incredibly unstable territory with the COVID-19 pandemic. The theoretical payoff from this case study shows how other journalism faculty could benefit from this type of hyper-flexible curriculum that helps students stay safe and capitalize on their at-home resources like the mobile phone, while also bringing their skillset up to speed with the era of digital journalism.

The traditional description of the flipped classroom model is that an instructor posts a series of videos online for students to watch outside the classroom, and then subsequently uses class time for hands-on or more engaged lessons with the students (Enfield, 2013; Mull, 2021). Our exploratory project diverged a bit from this traditional definition, as I offered an entirely asynchronous string of videos due throughout the term, but with no true "in class" segment in the general Writing for Media course. We occasionally touched on the posts or techniques in class, particularly during the in-class live-tweeting module where students broadcast a news piece using Instagram Live. This decision allowed me to pack more into class time for the general course syllabus in beginning journalism, forming a sort of "double dip" for students, where they are consuming online modules alongside in-class lessons.

Literature Review

Several studies have covered journalism departments' endless pursuit of teaching convergence media technologies as they emerged over the past ten years. A recent survey of American journalism programs showed a promising half (52.5%) of journalism educators surveyed (n= 39) are using social media in the classroom, and are introducing roughly 3.8 new platforms in their classes (Auxier, 2020). The study further showed there is a gap between educators' own use of a platform versus teaching the same program in the classroom (for example, 89% of educators were familiar with Hootsuite, but just 41% had it on their syllabus). Twitter and Facebook are the most popular social media platforms taught in the journalism classroom today (Cochrane, 2012; Kothari & Hickerson, 2016). Another landmark study in Italy studied the relationship between media professors' personal and professional use of social media, indicating that age and excessive personal use of platforms were drivers for a professor's willingness to integrate social media in the classroom (Manca & Ranieri, 2016). The study showed educators found YouTube-Vimeo (19.8%), Blog-Wiki (14%) and Facebook (12.8%) to be most useful in the classroom. Probing deeper into the student experience of learning these platforms, two separate studies of convergence journalism courses showed both students and journalism educators recognize the importance of updated social media for storytelling in the classroom (Auger et al. 2016; Fernández & Ureta, 2017). In Auger et al., researchers held focus groups with students in a journalism course on convergence media; results showed student apprehension and anxiety around learning a new platform was eased after spending more time with new technologies (Auger et al. 2016). Students in another convergence media class in Spain indicated in a large survey that "most students (52%) cite social media optimization (adapting news messages to social media) as being the most valuable aspect of the course," (Fernández & Ureta, 2017, p. 886).

A host of studies related to the transition to online learning at universities during the COVID-19 pandemic began to emerge in 2020. Globally, 91% of higher education institutions reported a transition from in-person learning to remote learning in the first half of 2020 (Marinoni et al., 2020). Scholars called on past terminology for internet-based classes to describe the types of online learning used in the pandemic; "online learning," "remote learning," "emergency online learning," "e-learning," "distance learning," or "flipped classroom model" (Prokes & Housel 2021; Bushell et al., 2021). While all these forms of online teaching were certainly used throughout the past 15 years, scholars in

2020 and 2021 highlighted the immediate and grandiose transition to online learning that much of the world's universities undertook.

The results of these studies are sobering. One study found students transitioning to online learning saw barriers in finding a quiet space, Wi-Fi connection and finances and additionally, students were more likely to experience more exhaustion and cynicism about college (Bushell et al., 2020). Similarly, a study of 356 community college students in Ohio found the single most significant obstacle in this transition was the upset of the work-life balance in losing employment options, and struggling with mental health issues (Prokes & Housel, 2021). Another study taken before the pandemic compared a flipped model classroom to a traditional classroom setting using the same course content and same instructor: results showed students had higher grades and more satisfaction in the face-to-face classroom (Poniatowski, 2019).

Outside the pandemic, one study of journalism students in 2015 tracked three years of student progress in a social media and mobile phone course (Mobile and Social Media or MSM) using a self-taught curriculum model (Mulrennan, 2018). Similar to the Emerging Social Media grant in my study, the researchers' goal was to analyze how presenting students with a package of social media applications could best prepare them for a fast-changing career, particularly if their coursework was self-guided. Results showed students gained a richer, more in-depth comprehension of how journalists use social media in the newsroom and were more efficient at identifying which tools best fit which news situation. An earlier study of the same class and journalism course content in Australia in 2011-2012 showed student hesitancy to adopt social media for news reporting lessened as they became more comfortable with the transition from personal use of social media to professional (Cochrane et al., 2012).

It's important to note the modules for this grant were approved as the pandemic began in March 2020. In other words, we didn't yet know the long-term situation higher education was entering, and thus such studies as listed above were not yet imaginable. The first term we launched this case study (Fall 2020) was the first full term Pacific University tried blended courses. Further, students in this course were still meeting once a week in person, so students were still having face-to-face time with the instructor. Pacific University returned to in-person teaching in Fall 2021 and beyond. Students using the Emerging Social Media series in the future will ideally be faced with less all-consuming screen time for their university coursework as they proceed through the series.

Background

In pitching my social media modules to the CETCI department to win their annual grant (the Teaching Advancement and Research Grants in Education Technology, TARGET grant), I focused on several themes:

1. The flipped classroom model as a desirable tool in digital pedagogy. In my application, I made the case that my journalism students could take an online, seven-part series of modules that each addressed a field in social media. Students would watch the online modules as a separate class on our university's content management software Moodle (similar to Canvas or Blackboard).

2. The gap in my Media Arts department curriculum in teaching social media skills to our media students. The Media Arts department at my small, private university has just four available majors, and about 40 total students enrolled between all four of these majors. Faculty resources are stretched thin. I made the case that we needed this $5,000 grant to teach social media as a supplement to our Writing for Media course, which sees many students from all four majors. I noted social media skills were ranked among the top three highly prized skills for graduating college students today, citing a 2016 study by the Tow-Knight Center which surveyed 31 news organizations (Stencel and Perry, 2016).

3. I emphasized the modules would ride on the shoulders of the existing library of resources I have from attending the PhDigital Bootcamp at Texas State University in 2019. We spent a segment covering how to teach social media analytics to undergraduates.

4. As I had started my grant application in the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020), I happened to mention that online teaching modules could be particularly useful for the sudden shift to online teaching in U.S. universities. This comment in my application became highly relevant in Spring 2020 when the university was judging grant applications, because the pandemic was only escalating.

The CETCI center awarded me the grant funds in May 2020, along with a budget to hire three guest speakers in the field of digital journalism. The videos for the modules were recorded throughout July and August, 2020. Guest speakers included the digital engagement editor for the Oregonian, Julie Evensen, the news editor for the Portland Mercury, Alex Zielinski, and doctoral candidate in digital pedagogy at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, J.D. Swerzenski. The course

was designed for students to take an online module capped at 40 minutes and split into three or four mini-videos, every two weeks. Modules consist of videos by myself or the guest lecture, the homework for the week, and a feedback section on the module. Some modules included new articles on social media, such as "11 Ways to Increase Instagram Engagement in 2021" (Canning, 2021) or "Social Media and Journalism: How to Effectively Reach the Public" (Barnhart, 2020).

The feedback sections were particularly useful in redesigning and tweaking the series at the end of the term, as students could generate first-person complaints and new thoughts after each module. Students submitted their work both on Moodle and on Instagram to the hashtag #itwentviralPacificUniversity, which allowed me to type in the hashtag and review their work for the week. Students take the module series as a supplement to the Writing for Media course, where it is listed on the syllabus for 20 pts. Students get points for each module, and the 20 points are built into their overall grade.

Arriving For Fall Term

The state of Oregon was, quite literally, on fire the week I launched our social media series in September 2020 (California and Oregon Wildfires, 2020). On September 8, 2020, most of the 17 students enrolled in the social media series were already located at their homes in rural Oregon or Portland because of the COVID-19 pandemic. My students and I began receiving evacuation alerts on our mobile phones depending on our location (KGW Staff, 2020). Some of my students ended up actually evacuating their homes because of Level 3 evacuation orders from the U.S. Forest Service. Additionally, the wildfire smoke had blanketed the Portland and Forest Grove region to the point that it was hazardous to go outside for about five days, and all university classes had moved online.

Despite all these converging factors, I launched our first module on September 17, 2020. We were exclusively holding classes online at that point, a factor which again made the online element of the modules even more convenient for the time period. True to the nature of this flipped classroom model, students took that first module (and all the rest) asynchronously at home on their own schedule.

The modules each came with a homework assignment to create an Instagram post or story with added complexities as the term progressed. Below is a list of the seven module topics, linked to the first video within that module series. The seven module topics were:

- Module 1: Introduction to Emerging Social Media
  (https://youtu.be/bjK3It2sMqs)
  This module lays out how students can earn credit and their social media certificate from taking the module series. Students learn about the TARGET grant, open up their own Instagram account (if they didn't have one), and post their first #itwentviralPacificUniversity assignment.

- Module 2: Terms in Social Media
  (https://youtu.be/RDtjuddQf6s)
  This module goes through the life cycle of a social media post, starting with brainstorming, posting, engagement of audience, and then analyzing the social analytics.

- Module 3: Best Photo Conventions
  (https://youtu.be/KtPnvrBSk7w)
  J.D. Swerzenski at UMass Amherst covers best practices for news-style photographs on mobile phones for social media, particularly when covering public protests.

- Module 4: Instagram Stories
  (https://youtu.be/XE5yQvsRKI0)
  This module explains the Story Highlights feature and pulls from glitzy YouTube star Louise Henry's tutorial on creating your first Instagram story. Her tutorial covers the many tools available within Stories.

- Module 5: Audience Engagement on Social Media
  (https://youtu.be/jTK-VfQAdYY)
  Julie Evensen of the Oregonian talks about her digital engagement job at the Oregonian. She uses the example of a social media "teaser" for an Oregonian documentary on a serial killer in Oregon to demonstrate a social media campaign.

- Module 6: Social Media Analytics
  (https://youtu.be/X99G44Uznrw)
  This module leads students through the basic analytics of Instagram and Facebook business accounts, as well as a Stukent (social media simulation website) tutorial that guides students through creating post promotions with a set budget.

- Module 7: In the Field
  (https://youtu.be/ZCPCq7pQeq8)
  Journalist Alex Zielinski of Portland Mercury takes students through her own social media accounts as she live-reports on the Black Lives Matter protests in Portland, in July 2020. She discusses best strategies for using Twitter while

reporting live and working with an editor back at an office.

Students also left written feedback as part of their assignment for each module. I emphasized to them their feedback was quite important as this series is in its early stages. The final module in the series requested a reflective essay on what worked best for students, as well as a brief survey that asked them about the time commitment, and their biggest takeaway from the entire series. The analysis section of this article relies on this student feedback to pinpoint what worked best and what needed improvement in the modules.

Learning Social Media While Oregon Crumbled Around Us

In their final reflection essays for the module series, students had the most dramatic reaction (lots of positive and negative opinions) to three modules over any other: Module 5: Audience Engagement, Module 6: Social Media Analytics and Module 7: In the Field with Journalist Alex Zielinski (see links above).

In Module 7, Zielinski was driving out on a nightly basis in August 2020 to downtown Portland to cover the Black Lives Matter protests over the death of George Floyd. Many of my students traveled downtown over the summer to protest, too. Between the tear gas, the government curfews, the federal law enforcement and the ongoing vandalism to downtown buildings, downtown Portland was rocked to the core (Levinson & Olmos, 2020). Zielinksi's live Twitter feed (@alex_zee) posted to the Portland Mercury website was a good resource where Portland audiences could track the location of the marches in real-time. Zielinksi in her second module video revisits her Twitter feed from the night of August 15, 2020 (https://youtu.be/TbwmB4dDp8c). Her narrative in the modules has a "behind-the-scenes" feel. She discusses how she places herself while shooting video and photos, and her struggle to tweet, walk, interview, and avoid objects thrown by protestors at police at the same time. Student homework for this module was to record a themed Instagram story of four videos, and post it as a Highlight folder on their Instagram page. Student reflections on the relevant nature of Zielinki's module was mixed.

> **Student Response:** "The most useful part aspect of this module was hearing Alex Z's perspective on how she uses social media in her career. It was also really useful to practice posting a series of story videos again" (personal correspondence on Moodle, December 2020).

> **Student Response:** "The use of real-world examples and events that Alex reported on were

very helpful in understanding what the experience of a news journalist can be. So often, when reporting on major events like the Portland protests, it's probable that a journalist can be put in a dangerous and potentially harmful position. Her advice to keep one's 'head on a swivel' and focus on the subject matter at all times was something I will take with me throughout my career" (personal correspondence on Moodle, December 2020).

> **Student Response:** "To me, seeing her perspective and her sharing her social media and how she manages was really valuable. I would change this aspect of this by having this either be one video or an actual meeting so we as a class could ask questions and seek further information about her career and connections with social media" (personal correspondence on Moodle, December 2020).

In their final survey and in their reflection essay, students were unanimous that social media analytics module was the most useful information to them. I created this module using the online Mimic Social program available from Stukent, which came recommended at the 2019 PhDigital Bootcamp at Texas State University (the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University uses Stukent to teach social media skills to their students). The Mimic Social program is a simulation dashboard of a real company launching a social media campaign for backpacks. For the homework for this module, I had students analyze a series of Instagram Insights from my own Instagram business account, which I gathered as screenshots off my mobile phone. Students examined the various metrics for the store and answered questions about the data in three categories: awareness, engagement and revenue.

Students across the board said these skills were the most valuable of all the skills offered in the series:

> **Student Response:** "I think the most valuable aspect of this module was actually interacting with a real business account and interpreting what the metrics meant. It was really helpful for me to not feel the pressure of trying to figure out my own business account, but rather taking real data from an actual account and interpreting it" (personal correspondence, Moodle, 2020).

> **Student Response:** "I think the tip of the iceberg here, learning the basics of how to use Facebook's analytics tools, was valuable. I learned some new terms and being able to know the differences between what drives engagement or views is important. I do think, however, that this was a little

too basic and self-explanatory in some senses. I would love to see the inclusion of some more advanced software or data" (personal correspondence, Moodle, 2020).

Student Response: "This has been my favorite module by far. I didn't know any of the information you presented in this module because I didn't even know there was a business feature on Instagram. I liked the assignment and that we explored an already existing page because then we can see how to compare data to previous weeks" (personal correspondence, Moodle, 2020).

Feedback for Modules 2 (Terms in Social Media) and 4 (Instagram Stories) was mixed. Several students (comically) noted I "dragged on" in Terms in Social Media.

Student Response: "As someone who learns new (non-procedural) information best through reading, I would have preferred a typed handout of the terms lecture that could be read as an alternative to the lecture. However, the videos were the most effective way (I think) of conveying how that information applies to those platforms. If anything, I would try to make those videos shorter and more concise because they did seem to drag a little at points" (personal correspondence, Moodle, 2020).

Student Response "The only thing I didn't really like was by the time I got to part 4 I felt like it kept dragging on and you were repeating yourself which is why I think just making it all one video, even if it is long, would be better. Overall, this module was fascinating and showed me a lot of new features I wasn't aware of and am excited to put to use on my photography Instagram page" (personal correspondence, Moodle, 2020).

The suggestion to give students a cheat sheet on the terms in this module was quite helpful: I added it to the module readings for next year's class to help them learn these terms. This could also help them study for a final assessment quiz on the series. Several students noted in Module 4 (Instagram Stories) that these videos were just too basic, as most students already know how to make a story.

Student Response: "I don't think that this was a particularly useful section because this class is for college students and anyone who already has an Instagram account most likely knows how to make a story. I would maybe merge this with another

section because it doesn't seem like something that needs its own module like photo editing" (personal correspondence, Moodle, 2020).

To the contrary, others remarked they didn't know how to produce a strong Instagram story, and they found the content useful. Similar to any college course, you may have beginner or advanced students in the same cohort. This type of contradictory feedback presented a quandary for the modules as whole, because one must walk this fine line of content that is advanced enough to be useful for the majority of students, but not so basic as to elicit the above responses. Fortunately, the 2021 round of feedback on modules will provide a second layer of commentary to help me best modify the level of rigor in each module.

Student Work: Live-tweeting and Instagram Stories

Perhaps the most powerful pedagogical lesson to take away from this series was how students used their new media homework assignments to capture real life in a period of real chaos in Oregon.

Here is a selection of successful Instagram posts and stories students captured for their homework:

interviewed someone in their pod. See an example of a live interview (https://www.instagram.com/p/CHQ8DfcFamT/).

We cut up the class hour into three shifts, with five students going live per shift. This way, students had other students logging on to send them a "clap" emoji or a question. I tried to visit every live feed to give feedback and ask questions. Student feedback in this section was quite positive.

> **Student Response:** "It's definitely out of my comfort zone, especially since you can't really plan ahead and edit things in post since everything has to be live and 'in the moment.' I think a big take away from that module specifically is to learn how to be time efficient and to keep people engaged, with consideration to viewers, as they provide input to your stream" (personal correspondence, Moodle, 2020).

> **Student Response:** "The new media skills that I tried out this term would have to be Instagram Live. I've never used Live before on my main account, so it was fun to experiment with it, and now I know how to use it for the future" (personal correspondence, Moodle, 2020).

> **Student Response:** "Even though I may have been familiar with how to use the Instagram platform as far as posting stories or news feed posts, one thing I hadn't really tried before--at least in this context-- was Instagram Live. I hadn't done an interview over Instagram Live before, so that was an interesting assignment and one that I think could be valuable going forward. I really enjoyed having a conversation in this way, and being able to use the audience watching to inform questions and interact with the interview as it was happening" (personal correspondence, Moodle, 2020).

Areas For Improvement

Students lagged behind in filling out the feedback portion of each module - a weak spot which I'm seeing again in fall 2021. I have made it part of the points for the module, but students still seem to think this section is optional (despite my many announcements to the contrary). I may convert the feedback sections to a mini-quiz next year to make better use of their time after the module. Additionally, I'm designing a before-and-after quiz for the series, to reliably gauge their learning absorption throughout the term.

Several setbacks limited this case study. These seven modules offer a good "starter" package to reporting with social media, but I don't quite feel students will come away as experts. Instead, the guest lectures

Adding to their work in Instagram posts and stories, students live-tweeted a journalistic narrative about COVID-19 lockdown for Module 5: Audience Engagement. We did this exercise in-class, instead of asynchronously (although some students took the Writing for Media exclusively online). We shared everyone's Instagram handle and then students spread out across campus so they could present vocally. Some students reported a solo-interview on a story they were reporting for class; others interviewed another Instagram follower as a double screen-share, and still others

from journalists or the module on social media analytics can offer a sturdy foundational base for mass media students to build on as their careers progress. Having their certificate in hand is a good way to show employers they are familiar with the basics.

Additionally, within three-to-five years, I can only imagine that the insights and analytics pages for both Facebook and Instagram will once again change, or that America's online news will have migrated to yet another social media platform. The information in these seven modules will likely be obsolete within two years, including the hyper-links cited within this article. For any faculty trying to update their journalism curriculum, new media is a fast-paced field. Thus, these seven modules will likely need to be revised within two years, and then every two years after to keep up with advances in social media reporting.

Future Research

Perhaps the most rigorous opportunity for future research is to quantitatively measure the effects of the series across multiple school years, by testing students at the beginning and end of the term on their social media knowledge. This case study could be strengthened by adding in further quantitative data over a series of years to best monitor and improve on the series. Areas tested could include 1) students' knowledge of social media analytics 2) students' skill at applying and using social media analytics 3) ability of students to critically construct a meaningful news story using Instagram or another social media platform. Gathering and comparing data across two or three school years would also identify weaknesses for designing the series in the coming years.

Conclusion

This case study occurred at the intersection of two powerful axes: a volatile pandemic and political climate in the US. and the continuing evolution of the digital era as it influences how journalists report the news. On this stage, journalism faculty across the country have navigated their own digital innovation in different ways as they responded to the pandemic, and this case study presents just one hyper-flexible option for adapting one's journalism curriculum. The Emerging Social Media Skills module presents a host of advantageous pedagogy for faculty hoping to shift their curriculum, including its asynchronous, online nature, its flipped classroom model, and the ability of students to use their existing mobile phone and the existing social media platforms of today to practice basic journalism. The socially-distanced elements of the modules are tremendously useful for students taking courses online at home, or even in another state.

Additionally, the emphasis on mobile phone adoption for the newsroom is clearly highlighted as a useful classroom tool here: further journalism curriculum innovation should work to address how best to keep integrating mobile phones into the journalism classroom. As I stressed in the first introductory module to my journalism students, new media skills for reporters are highly prized among today's mass media graduates, and quite mandatory for university journalism programs to remain relevant.

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