

DMU Seed Grant 2020
Constructive Journalism pilot project
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Version for the public
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The pilot project was shaped before the lockdown and in its original form it entailed fieldwork news reporting by DMU students, to cover stories from a deprived area in Leicester, with models of constructive journalism such as Peace Journalism (PJ). PJ covers stories in an accurate way without simplifying ideas and experiences of people and communities. Like all constructive journalism models, PJ aims to offer more opportunities for conflict transformation, by making a wider range of views, experiences, and solutions more visible (Lynch & McGoldrick 2005).

Following the extraordinary changes brought by the pandemic and the national lockdown, the pilot project was reorganised entirely online, and it was refocused on piloting applications of models of constructive journalism on topics of choice of the students.

The online version of the pilot project maintained the original aims, among which first of all the need to stimulate constructive understanding of current socio-political change in England, and undoing of polarisation dynamics, through constructive journalism stories produced at DMU. The pilot also served the need to test constructive hands-on approaches with students, and to start developing a practice-based network of professionals, to develop and enrich my new third year UG module on PJ (revalidated UG journalism programme), running from 2021.

These aims touch on SDGs 16, but also 10 and 11. The project aimed to strengthen journalism as an institution (16.6, 16.A) and to have participants reflecting on ways to support freedom of expression of citizens who are not usually given impartial space (16.10); it aimed to promote inclusion of new voices irrespective of their status (10.2), to stimulate thinking about alternative practices that can eliminate unbalanced practices in journalism (10.3) and support positive links between different local groups and areas (11.A).

Nine students volunteered to participate (call circulated to JH and SH journalism students, UG & PG) and they were organised into three balanced groups (with one MA student per group); students in each group were asked to support each other in brainstorming ideas for stories and in producing a drafted story for each participant.

The synchronous structured activities of the online pilot consisted of a full training day (April 21) and a full fieldwork day (May 11), and the project was organised in the following stages:

1. reflecting on main ideas, aims, approaches (using material on OneNote): up to April 21
2. online training day April 21: this included a Q/A session with John Harris (*The Guardian*), author of the "Anywhere but Westminster" documentary series, about best approaches for effective and constructive journalism
3. brainstorming and early work in groups to select topics: April 21 - early May
4. digital fieldwork day May 11: main research day; contacting people and running online investigations to collect the material to write the news stories about the selected topics
5. writing and polishing, reflecting on constructive journalism, support sessions with project leader: May-June

6. pitching, publication, online circulation, & distribution of prizes: June-July.

The tools used for this project were: emails for communication, Zoom for the synchronous activities, OneNote for the development of the activities' material, Panopto for the asynchronous introduction, Gdrive to share drafts of news stories and provide feedback to participants, and Twitter for circulating the stories published with the hashtag #DMUSeedGrant2020.

All nine students participated in the structured activities and engaged comprehensively in the project. Each student provided a full draft of their story, which was used by the project leader to provide feedback. Brian Dodds (UG Journalism DMU) and Amardeep Bassey (MA journalism DMU) also helped in this phase, to evaluate the drafts of the students and support the project leader in the allocation of prizes. The vouchers of 50£, 100£ and 150£ (repurposed from previous version of project) were allocated to each group (Group 3 came first, Group 1 second, Group 2 third), on the basis of a ranking obtained from the evaluation of the drafts and their potential for publication, developed in collaboration with my journalism colleagues. About publication, the project leader provided information about constructive journalism platforms to pitch stories to, and about self-publishing platforms such as Medium. The students were then left free to pitch or publish their stories in platforms of their choice.

Reflections and Practice of constructive journalism

The students engaged quite well with ideas of constructive approaches to current socio-political developments in the training sessions. They also worked hard on producing drafts that could either focus on solutions or offer alternative views and unheard experiences, in order to overcome polarising frames and stereotypes. The stories gave voice to citizens who are not usually given enough space in the media and promoted the inclusion of new voices irrespective of their status, potentially supporting positive links between different local groups and areas.

For future projects linking sustainable social change with journalism

The outcomes of this pilot will be very useful for the development of my UG module on PJ. The pilot revealed that journalism students can engage in intensive training sessions online when they are offered an alternative idea about making journalism. Students like the idea of producing change through journalism. Professional practitioners can be involved for guest lecturing and potential collaborations between DMU and media outlets.

For projects that want to emphasise circulation of news outputs to wider audiences, a similar activity could be run with professional journalists, to cover stories about research done at DMU and then monitor their impact in creating more constructive views of science (stem or social/human). This is part of my research interests. I am already thinking about a new extracurricular project along these lines, and I am very happy to discuss it with anyone interested.

Having the freedom to choose a topic, as done in this pilot, is a useful approach in curricular modules where each student has to demonstrate an ability to produce their own work. However, it can affect the ability to work in groups when group work is required. Future projects relying on group work may need a focus on *one topic only*.

Online support to deliver outputs takes exponentially more time than planned, and it is difficult to keep a variety of students engaged over many weeks to finalise and push outputs out. Therefore, outputs in extracurricular projects should require *very little work*, in order to be produced in a few days after training and before momentum is lost.

Pitching is difficult for some students. Some students are not confident enough to pitch a story to platforms they do not know, and offering guidance to a variety of participants for pitching different stories is very time consuming. Future projects may need to include a *pitching instructor*. Identifying *one specific media outlet* to target before selecting the topic and shaping the story can also be very useful. For less resourceful projects, a quick alternative can be that of providing a project platform (blog website) where students can publish their outputs. Publication in established news media can then refer to that project platform.

Feedback from Participants

“Great idea to focus on solutions journalism. This is an important area that could feature among many other fields of journalism. You were very helpful and supportive all along the way. I hope to see other people’s work. For improvement: think it’s tough to work in a group under Covid lockdown unless you’re all mining a similar dataset or some such and discussing it in depth-everyone wants to go solo on these projects (at least in our group 😊) I’d suggest putting a few more examples for us to view to help us get going earlier. Thanks so much for letting me be involved”

“Thank you for facilitating the project, I enjoyed the discussions with everyone, working with my group and writing my story”

“Thank you for the opportunity and for helping me make this story the best I can possibly make it”

“Thank you for all your help with it”