

# Bridging History and Modern Journalism: Empowering Students with Digital Literacy and Employability Skills

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## Summary

The 15-credit module Investigating Journalism: British Newspapers from The Spectator to Stead explores the history of journalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, connecting historical themes like poverty, crime, and celebrity scandal to contemporary issues. With 10 lectures and seminars, 60 students engaged in practical, skill-building activities, including analysing historical sources, writing mock pitches for commissioning editors, and producing articles that link past and present. Employability was a core focus, with students developing skills in digital literacy, persuasive writing, and journalistic techniques, such as headline crafting and sub-editing.

## Please briefly describe the activity undertaken for the case study

This module is a second-year history module that includes 10 seminars and 10 lectures focusing on the development of eighteenth and nineteenth century news media. These sessions linked to themes that are relevant today, such as poverty, celebrity scandal, migration, warfare, and crime. The key aims of the module were twofold: build students' awareness of the history of journalism, whilst also leaving the module with skills that could be used outside of academia.

The module included 3 assessments: a standard Primary Source Analysis (50%), a 400-word email pitch to a commissioning editor of either The Guardian or The Conversation (15%), and a Historical Parallel Article (35%) (assuming approval from the commissioning editor), in which students had to identify and explain an historical parallel between one of the course themes (crime, scandal, poverty etc.) and a news story, event, or phenomenon today.

In addition to engaging students with fun activities, such as games and drawings that connected to eighteenth and nineteenth century news, the module also included exercises in the classroom that were more journalistic in tone, such as working on headlines – for example, writing a headline as if a nineteenth century event such as the Peterloo Massacre was breaking news today, or mastering the 'inverted pyramid' technique of journalism, where the first few sentences of a story are crucial to grabbing the reader's attention. Students also looked at sub-editing by editing down a paragraph of academic writing so that it could be used as a piece of journalism, allowing students to

draw the distinction between two types of writing, and begin to see how journalism worked.

## How was the activity implemented?

This module was designed with employability skills in mind, and a desire for it to be valuable for students moving forward. Published newspaper articles and their corresponding pitches written by the module leader were shared with the students with clear explanations of how the mechanics of how journalism works today. Students were very engaged and eager to learn this practical knowledge, but also enjoyed the practical tasks designed to develop their digital literacy skills. The opening session of the module took the form of a practical workshop utilising [Gale Primary Sources](#) (online database of historical newspapers) – it was important that students understood how to use this resource, and felt comfortable using online newspaper repositories so that they could source articles independently for following weeks' tasks and assessments. Feedback was resoundingly positive on the use of Gale, and many students began to use other databases and resources to broaden their interests.

At the end of week one and week six, students had the opportunity to give informal feedback on what they wanted from the course. It was important to the module lead for students to feel as if they were playing an active role in shaping the activities and exercises that they participated in. Through this, it was found that a lot of the students were very interested in the more practical skills around journalism. In response, the module leader incorporated small activities in each seminar around this – including work on headlines, subheadings, 'hook' paragraphs, and image use. The module leader also planned a final lecture, 'Writing News Today', which included some career tips and inviting a member of the University Press Office to speak about their role within the university. They shared their experiences working with academics, how pitching to editors works, and how they liaised with news outlets, including TV.

In support of the Email Pitch, a new rubric was designed (see Appendices), as standard history marking schemes are difficult to apply when assessing an email. It was important for students to feel 'email-literate' and be able to write persuasively to anyone, in particular future employers. These key skills are especially transferrable, so the new rubric to support the marking scheme reflected this, with the module leader seeking input from the Career Consultant for Histories, Languages and Cultures to ensure authenticity.

## Has this activity improved programme provision and student experience, if so, how?

The module improved student confidence: through analytical thinking students developed their own ideas and became more critical of their understanding of news, and the way that history works from a more practical perspective – they were encouraged to make these connections themselves, rather than being shown them. Efforts to improve student

digital literacy, fluency, and written skills outside of academia ensured that students left the module with an enhanced skillset.

## Did you experience any challenges in implementation and if so how did you overcome these?

In terms of planning and designing the module, the module leader consulted a range of secondary literature to judge key themes that occurred during the development of news media over the eighteenth and nineteenth century. For example, these included the advent of new technologies such as the rotary press or telegraph, the role of censorship and lawmaking, and the rise of 'new journalism' and the tabloid press. Representation was also key, with sessions touching on gender, imperialism and race.

The biggest challenges were experienced in the classroom – these were not negative challenges, but ones that spoke of generational difference. In the first session, students were asked informally 'how do you consume news?' and the vast majority responded that they consumed it digitally and that no one had purchased a paper newspaper before. Student news consumption took place primarily through TikTok, Instagram, or social media in general – this is not the response that the module lead was expecting. It was expected that students would respond that they consumed their news digitally, but that it was through websites or dedicated apps, not solely social media. It was very interesting to learn this and made the module lead consider that in the future it may be more engaging for students to design an assessment that was based around creating a TikTok or reel for Instagram, rather than an 1,100-word newspaper article for The Guardian or The Conversation, both of which students were unfamiliar with as they consumed their news elsewhere.

Creating social media content and using video editing skills could be helpful for students' various career pathways, however, producing a written piece of work remains very useful when forming part of a portfolio. Sometimes saving and sending video files to potential employers is less immediate than a piece of written work that is easy to access, clear and universally formatted. The module leader was clear to stress to students that they would leave the course with a piece of work that they could send to prospective employers that showcased their abilities to write clearly, concisely, and persuasively.

Another challenge was that students were less familiar with undertaking primary source analyses, required for Assessment 1, and instead typically write essays (i.e. a 1500-word piece). Really getting down to the specifics of why one newspaper article, for example, from the 1850s on the Irish Famine might have been written in a specific way for a certain audience, and picking apart the background context of the newspaper itself – rather than the history of the news event in question – was a challenge for students, so this is something to address in future.

## How does this case study relate to the Hallmarks and Attributes you have selected?

**Authentic Assessment:** Students pitching commissioned articles is authentic, and students emerge with a piece of work that they can use in their portfolios when they are writing CVs and approaching prospective employers. The module lead provided templates of their own commissioned pitches (The Guardian, Financial Times) that students could use to support them in procuring opportunities in news media, with their finished articles acting as accessible displays of their writing.

**Confidence:** Asking students to pitch and identify their own topic and giving them the freedom to do this improves their confidence. The module lead made time for informal chat each week so that students could develop their ideas in class, which is also useful for them in a professional context.

**Digital Fluency & Digital Literacy:** Using the Gale newspaper archive to source their own articles and read more widely helped students understand how news media works today. Students were not used to accessing certain digital repositories, so this familiarised them with this approach.

**Research-Connected Teaching:** The module was designed towards research and employability skills and increasing student performance in these areas.

## How could this case study be transferred to other disciplines?

It can be transferred to other disciplines; everyone should be interested in reaching non-academic audiences to increase the impact and public knowledge of their work. A researcher in any discipline across the University would benefit from a reasonably high-profile article in either The Guardian or The Conversation – these are global platforms that help disseminate our work more widely.

Additionally, researchers in any discipline benefit from being able to write a convincing email, and the digital research methods utilised – searching, understanding patterns and trends, recognising influential actors – are cross-disciplinary. Furthermore, the skill to speak plainly and communicate complex scenarios and subjects in accessible ways is often overlooked but remains important in the workplace.

Many students on this module were joint honours – from English, Politics, and French – and some were exchange students from overseas. This led to lively and productive discussion about politics today, lawmaking, and consumer culture across the world and across disciplines. There is potential for linking with the Law School and Heseltine Institute in future – students were very interested in making connections between news issues as they occurred in history and today.

At its core, this module was about gaining digital skills whilst reaching non-academic audiences. Being able to navigate complex resources and write for a non-specialist audience are real assets.

## If someone else were to implement the activity within your case study, what advice would you give to them?

Being able to write for non-specialist audiences is just as important outside of academia as within it. Writing persuasively, and without the use of academic jargon is an important skill, and we need to be wary of solely teaching students to write in a way that is not used in real-world scenarios.

Fostering an environment for creative freedom is important – allowing students to have the space to form their own ideas was a key part of this module. Consider that everyone has their own interests that they bring to the table and give them the space to explore those.

Making time to gather feedback throughout the module – asking for a few words to be shared on Post-it notes at the end of sessions – is important, both for students to feel that they are being listened to, and to show them that they are taking an active role in their learning experience.

Disinformation and fake news are worrying factors in our everyday lives, but they have their roots in history. Understanding that not only helps us trace their evolution but provides us with the armour to recognise and challenge them.

## Appendices

An example Marking Rubric for an Email Pitch assessment, taken from Module HIST256.

### **Marking Rubric – Email Pitch assessment – HIST256**

Criteria used to mark the email assessments will be assessed around four main principles:

- Content and research
- Insight
- Writing style
- Coherence

**5 70+: Exemplary pitch** – the angle or theme is very relevant to today, and the key themes have been outlined with exceptional clarity and coherence. Language is clear and accessible, and the structure is easy to read, with points building on each other. The tone is persuasive and convincing.

**4 60–69: A very good pitch** – the angle or theme feels relevant to today, and key themes have been identified, but more detail could enhance it further. Language is relatively clear and accessible, and the pitch is well-structured. The tone feels convincing.

**3 50-59: A good pitch** – the angle or theme could be developed to feel more relevant to today. Key themes are not clearly identified, and the piece is lacking in some clarity and coherence. Language does not feel convincingly journalistic, and/or the structure could be worked on. The tone is a little inconsistent and less persuasive.

**2 40-49: A passable pitch** – the angle or theme is unconvincingly argued and does not feel relevant to today. Key themes are not clearly outlined and are lacking in detail. Language does not feel journalistic, and/or the structure is difficult to understand, with little sense of flow. The tone is barely convincing or persuasive.

**1 <35-39: Not a strong pitch / Un-commissioned** – the angle or theme of the article is not argued at all, and key themes have not been identified or expanded upon. Language use is poor and there is limited structure to the piece, with little sense of flow. The tone is not convincing or persuasive.

## References

- [Gale Primary Sources](#)
- [The Conversation](#)
- [The Guardian](#)

