

## **Toward a theorization of student journalism collaboration in international curricula**

### **Abstract**

Adopting an international approach to journalism pedagogy, this study reports on the findings of a global journalism collaboration project involving 267 undergraduate and postgraduate students from Germany, Italy, Kenya, Uganda, Romania, Colombia and Australia. Over six weeks in 2019, students collaborated to produce multimedia news stories on current issues. Using student survey results and written evaluation assessments, we report on the benefits and challenges of international student journalism collaboration. The most significant challenge was differential access to ICTs among African partner countries and, using empirical data, we offer a set of “guardrails” for future international student journalism collaboration projects.

### **Introduction**

Developments in digital communications technologies and the impact of globalization have highlighted the need for a contemporary journalism that is less parochial and more global in practice and outlook (Ward 2005, 2008). A more global-minded perspective also underpins recent calls for international networking and collaboration between news workers that changing technological and cultural conditions have deemed a “necessity” (Alfter 2016: 298). The necessity to collaborate can also be seen in recent innovations in journalism education and its accompanying theorization (Bacon 2011; Leask 2011; Gaunt 1992; Deuze 2006). However, research on curriculum internationalization efforts is scant and there is little agreement on the implementation of such a strategy (Wake 2012; Knight 2004; Bacon 2011). In a bid to address the need for more global journalism education, in 2019 six tertiary institutions in Australia, Africa, Eastern and Western Europe and South America formed the Global Journalism Collaboration Project (GJCP) involving 267 students collaborating in lateral groups to investigate and produce multimedia news stories relevant to their international partner countries such as climate change, refugees and poverty. One of the major obstacles to collaboration was the unequal distribution in access to and use of ICTs among African partner countries. To deepen our understanding of the complexities of participating in cross-cultural collaborations in journalism education, with the aim of producing a set of guardrails for future internationalization efforts in journalism education, this paper asks, “Can a structured approach to cross border collaborative journalism teaching address the real-life challenges of this type of journalism?” The findings reveal persistent lower levels of Internet connectivity or the lack of affordable, robust broadband Internet service among those living in less industrialized nations impede participation in international curriculum collaborative schemes. However, building into curricula modules that foster ‘global understanding and consciousness’ as the foundation of ethical journalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Ward 2005, 328), may raise student awareness of the varying conditions of contemporary journalism practice in different geographical contexts, particularly the Global South.

### **Digital Inequalities in the Global South**

It is estimated that globally, about 4 billion people, the majority of them in the Global South, are still digitally excluded from electronic participation, potentially denying them equitable

access to digitally-based social and economic opportunities that are shaping 21C societies. To better understand the situation in Africa there is need to move beyond the dichotomic division between the “haves and have not” in terms of Internet access and to focus instead on the “multidimensionality of digital inequalities” (Mutsvairo and Ragnedda, 2019b: 360), including autonomy of technological use, lack of social support and digital illiteracy, all of which hamper efforts to eradicate digital inequalities in several less developed environments (see Mutsvairo and Ragnedda 2017).

While research exploring the impact of digital inequalities both in the ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ is readily available (See van Deursen et.al, 2017; Hargittai and Dobransky 2017; Ragnedda, 2017; Mutsvairo and Ragnedda, 2019a), studies looking into how the uneven distribution of digital technologies affect journalism education are scarce. Examples include Sagrista and Matbob’s (2016) investigation on how the digital divide affects journalism education in Papua New Guinea and Lab and Tejkalova’s (2014) examination of critical digital literacy as a way of improving journalism education. Further, as argued by Van Dijk (2005) as new information and communication technologies continue to develop, they may leave a debilitating impact on societies’ most fundamental values and generate unintended consequences such as alienation and social equality.

## **Methodology**

With the assistance of Pressources, an organization providing tools and resources to connect journalism schools and locate international journalism expertise, two of the authors of this study (XXX and XXX) from the University of XXX recruited partners for the GJCP from journalism schools at Aga Khan University (Nairobi, Kenya), Makerere University (Kampala, Uganda), Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (Bavaria, Germany), Babes-Bolyai University (Cluj- Napoca, Romania), Scuola di Giornalismo Walter Tobagi (Milan, Italy) and independent journalism students from Colombia. The GJCP was formulated as part of a broader review of the journalism curriculum at XXX, with the subject-specific aim in The Hive: Collaborative Journalism, of equipping students with the skills and cultural knowledge to participate in cross border journalistic collaboration that have lately been modelled in large-scale industry projects such as the Panama and Paradise Papers. The majority of participating students were between 21 and 30 years of age with those enrolled at UTS local, fee paying undergraduate journalism students in the final year of their course major.

We used a mixed-methods research design to analyze data comprising macro (ie. university administered surveys) and micro level (ie. individual course assessment) evaluations from the 149 students enrolled in the subject. UTS’s course evaluation data were used because the GJCP was designed and delivered by two of the authors of this study (XXX and XXX) who embedded the project into course content. The benefits of a mixed-methods approach for assessing learning perceptions and course experience have been demonstrated in research evaluating television news capstone experiences in journalism and mass communication programs (Tanner, Forde, Besley and Weir 2012); perceptions of science-based education and training among medical/health journalists (Furlan 2016) and attitudinal changes and instructor-learner experiences (see Loizzo, Watson and Watson 2018). Recognizing the value in this varied methodological approach, we used quantitative data comprising statistical results from two UTS-administered student survey instruments, the Early Feedback Survey

or EFS (n=47) and the Student Feedback Survey or SFS (n=95), as well as qualitative content derived from UTS students' course level written evaluation assessments of the GJCP (n=141).

**i. Quantitative data**

Across the university, the EFS link was emailed to students in Week 4 (1 to 8 April 2019) of a 12-week semester and anonymized results were provided to teaching staff. The three-question standard EFS was intended to gauge students' course expectations (Q1), the learning opportunities facilitated (Q2) and overall satisfaction (Q3).

The end of semester SFS survey link was emailed to students in Week 11 (27 May 2019) and contained 10 questions that were focused on the communication of stated learning objectives, provision of learning opportunities, perception of course quality (skill acquisition, industry relevance and innovation), critical reflection, practical learning activities and development of professional awareness.

**ii. Qualitative data**

The course-level written evaluation assessment involved students submitting a one paragraph reflection on the benefits and pitfalls of international journalism collaboration using key readings, information and resources from the subject outline and Blackboard e-learning site. Qualitative analysis of the data collected involved 'close reading of [the] text, reflecting on data and writing down interpretations, and sequential text interpretations as examples' (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, as cited in Renz, Carrington and Badger 2018, 824). It included preliminary and focused analysis of the student evaluations for both the content and context of communication (Weber 1990 as cited in Renz et.al. 2018, 825). Interpretive recording involved the authors agreeing upon a set of coding categories or thematic categorizations arising from emergent patterns, emphases and themes (see Symon and Cassell, 1998). This cross-checking procedure ensured intercoder reliability and compliance with reporting standards for the evaluation of content.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Early Feedback Survey (EFS)**

In the EFS instrument 47 of 149 students (or 32%) voluntarily participated in the survey and for the three questions related to course expectations (Q1), learning opportunities (Q2) and course satisfaction (Q3) students rated out of 5 the Q1 as 4.09 (SD 0.8), Q2 as 4.17 (SD 0.56) and Q3 as 4.17 (SD 0.67) – see Figure 1.

### **Student Feedback Survey (SFS)**

SFS results were consolidated to produce an average score for each of the 10 criteria and an average response rate of 64% or 95 out of 149 students (see Figure 2). The facilitation of learning criterion (SFS Q10) that rated teaching performance received the highest score in the SFS criteria with 4.46 out of 5 (mean score). The second highest score related to

students' perception of their own contributions to learning with "I made the most of my opportunities to learn in this subject" (SFS Q2) rated 4.00 out of 5 (mean score). For the SFS questions on professional readiness, "This subject provided practical learning activities to develop new skills and knowledge I may need in the workplace" (SFS Q8) the score was 3.83 out of 5 (SFS Q8), the third highest rating of the 10 questions contained in the SFS. Similarly, the result for "This subject has developed my understanding of my intended profession" (Q9) rated 3.78 out of 5 (mean score). On course quality indicators, the university's most indicative SFS rating is for the criterion "Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of this subject" (Q3) which was rated 3.43 out of 5 (mean score).

### **Course-level written evaluations of the GJCP**

The student written evaluation assessment was submitted on 15 June 2019 by 141 out of 149 students enrolled in the subject (95%). The three most significant issues identified in the evaluations were thematized into the following categories:

#### **i. Digital Inequalities**

The most compelling finding of the evaluations was the breakdown in communication between international student groups resulting from the digital inequality in participating African countries Uganda and Kenya. While most students diagnosed the problem matter-of-factly as "issues of internet accessibility and timing" (UTS Student 20, AKU and Germany), "a lack of necessary technology to assist in conducting the meeting" (UTS Student 35, Makerere), "the least avoidable obstacle, and that is technology failures" (UTS Student 27, Makerere) and "a disconnect in terms of the software not working" (UTS Student 39, Makerere), other students expressed shock and dismay in comments such as "...the reason for their silence was eye opening: they had limited internet access. This opened my eyes to the lived reality for hundreds of millions around the world, and the barriers that exist in facilitating a successful international collaboration" (UTS Student 61, AKU and Germany). Exemplifying Mutsvairo and Ragnedda's (2019a) argument that despite the exponential growth of mobile telephony, Internet access in many African countries remains elitist in nature, another student marveled at the GJCP university partners' failure to consider differential access to ICTs as a major obstacle to collaboration: "In hindsight, it seems even a touch naïve to have not considered the potential digital divide that might be present between Australia and Uganda – the country with whom we were partnered" (UTS Student 12, Makerere). The internet connectivity issues students encountered need to be understood in the context of digital colonialism (Kwet 2019), in which big tech corporates such as Google and Facebook control global digital ecosystems by using breakthrough technology as a means to launch a new phase of quasi-imperial, hegemonic domination of the Global South. Raising students' awareness of contemporary debates in journalism research about the exercise of imperial power in the governance of digital technology and Internet architecture would provide a reference point for future student journalism collaborations.

Despite the communication difficulties, some students were creative in their workarounds: one group diarized meeting times outside of known internet slowdown periods to deter this

obstacle: “Our international team’s limited access to Internet was also a challenge we had to overcome, which we did, by scheduling specific meeting times” (UTS Student 74, Makerere); another used a combination of communication methods to maintain contact by ensuring “most phone calls were with our Australian team while simultaneously messaging those in Uganda” (UTS Student 31, Makerere), and another switched platforms: “We overcame technical difficulties by changing our communication platform from Slack and Facebook messenger to Whatsapp, a platform that made group calls and texts easier” (UTS Student 79, Makerere).

Cultural differences in the use of technology were cited by some as the primary reason for communication difficulties. In those student evaluations Australia’s “passively-available text and email culture” is compared to “our international partners [who] are used to on-demand availability for phone calls” (UTS Student 76, Makerere). Similarly, one student expressed the varying cultural appropriation of technology using the language of direct/indirect communication: “Australia operates on an indirect method of communication, relying heavily on text while Uganda operates primarily through telephonic conversations” (UTS Student 2, Makerere). These student insights suggest a developing understanding of the ways in which digital communication technologies are transforming social practices and knowledge politics in the Global South (see Young 2019).

## ii. **Language barriers and navigating different socio-legal contexts**

Students described a series of challenges arising from their cross-border collaboration. While the language of communication and instruction was English, not all international partners were native English speakers and as one student described “...unfortunately often due to language barriers any material (online) that they could provide us with was usually in German without the possibility of translation online” (UTS Student 34, Germany). Some students managed translation issues by repurposing the technology: “Overall, the language barrier was an issue, so we communicated through text only rather than calling, so as to take the speaking pressure off the Ugandan students...” (UTS Student 5, Makerere).

Digital technologies used in much of the Global South are largely Western-centric in nature. For example, the majority of people in Africa need to be conversant in one of the colonial languages such as French or English to be able to fully participate in online activities. According to Mutsvairo and Ragnedda (2019a) this linguistic requirement presents a significant barrier for many digital aspirants living in the Global South including those who are able to read and write, like the students sampled in this study. Journalism courses in countries such as Uganda and Kenya are taught in English, a second language to most of the citizens of these countries, yet, as confirmed by student evaluations their knowledge and ability to communicate in English lacked fluency. This prompts the question why journalism and other courses are being taught in English and not Swahili, an African language spoken by the majority of people living in East Africa. Decolonial scholarship refutes assumptions that knowledge comes from the Global North (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2011). We are cognisant of research that has conceptualized journalism as a source and medium of knowledge (See Wihbey, 2016; Undurraga, 2018; Meditsch, 2005) underpinning the need to promote local sources of journalistic knowledge and training. Mbembe (2015) believes the major aims of the decolonial movement include critiquing prevailing Western models of

knowledge while seeking to promote the development of alternatives. But in much of the Global South, many still feel the sense of inferiority and “a desire to be more like the colonisers” (Pyke, 2010: 551) prompting others like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o to urge Africans to “decolonise the mindset” (wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Aside from the language barrier, many students described news story translation across cultures as a significant hurdle despite agreeing on a common theme:

We chose a broad topic (sustainability) but there still seemed to be a disconnect between story ideas and the way they could be intertwined to create “international stories”. For example, the Australian group ideas were broader so that we could potentially incorporate a Ugandan element, such as recycling and food waste, however the Ugandan stories were very location specific, such as cement graves in Africa, making it hard for us to contribute to that side of the collaboration (UTS Student 72, Makerere).

And some acknowledged that geographical location was an important consideration in deciding on a news story to investigate with international partners: “In general, our international collaboration was a success but was somewhat stymied by the fact that our story focused on cruise ships and shore power, and Romania has quite a small coastline bordering only the Black Sea” (UTS Student 44, FSPAC Romania). Navigating different socio-legal contexts was also a challenge as the following student described in relation to their story on abortion:

We were particularly interested in obtaining sources from Uganda. However, one student from Makerere informed us that given abortion is strictly illegal in Uganda, it would be very difficult to obtain anyone who would be willing to discuss abortion, although she did attempt to find some sources. This was an insightful element of our international collaboration, revealing some of the limitations imposed on journalists in other countries (UTS Student 13, Makerere).

A greater understanding of the differing socio-legal contexts of global journalism practice was a desirable outcome of these collaborations though pointed to the need for further research into the ways teaching staff may better prepare students to work in international contexts (Wake 2012).

### iii. **International conditions for journalism practice and cultural awareness**

Despite their critiques, for some students the collaboration experience inspired them to pursue a career as a foreign correspondent (UTS Student 3, Makerere) whilst others honed their communication skills: “I learnt a lot of professional and interpersonal skills by collaborating with professionals and students in Uganda and think that my overall article benefitted from the collaboration” (UTS Student 58, Makerere). Aside from help with their individual stories .. “...it was an overall great learning experience and allowed my Australian story be internationalized with the help of the Uganda students” (UTS Student 54, Makerere), the GJCP provided many with an opportunity “...to see what studying journalism is like in a country remarkably unlike our own” (UTS Student 45, Makerere) and “...to

connect with students studying journalism in a different country...” (UTS Student 43, Makerere).

The reflections also yielded useful insights about the practice of contemporary journalism in different countries and showed that in spite of the challenges, the concept of global journalism (Herbert, 2001; Berglez, 2013) remains alive if results of this study are anything to go by, as evident in the comment “...the process undertaken for our collaboration allowed me to reflect on the complexity of journalism on an international scale, a perspective I have now greater insight about” (UTS Student 57, AKU). This insight was described by one student as a “learning experience like no other” that resulted in “the sharing of knowledge and experiences of journalism in Makerere and Sydney” (UTS Student 67, Makerere), and for another “...broadened my understanding of internationalizing a local story, and international reporting” (UTS Student 59, Italy). For one student, realization of the difficulties facing journalists in Uganda was a defining moment:

We were telling our collaborators that we all want to pursue a career in journalism after Uni, but then when we asked them, they said no. We found this confusing but they soon explained that to be a journalist in Uganda is very risky and dangerous, due to the threat of violence and fear from the current government. So, not only did we all help and benefit from each other in working on our stories, but we also gathered a greater understanding on what journalism really is and how it can be so different and impactful around the world (UTS Student 81, Makerere).

This greater awareness of the international conditions for journalism practice was a key objective of the GJCP and gave Australian students a deeper appreciation for their own somewhat compromised media freedoms, as articulated in recent public discussion about the use and misuse of national security legislation.

## **Conclusion**

The EFS and SFS numerical results indicate student perceptions of course satisfaction declined towards the end of the course, likely attributable to the difficulties students experienced communicating with their partner universities because of differential access to ICTs. Therefore, greater awareness of the digital divide is needed in curriculum innovation efforts. While course satisfaction levels fell significantly across the semester from 4.17 (EFS Q3) to 3.43 (SFS Q3) along with student perceptions of learning expectations from 4.09 (EFS Q1) to 3.70 (SFS Q1), students’ perceptions of their uptake of learning opportunities in the subject varied little, ie. from 4.17 (EFS Q2) to 4.00 (SFS Q2 – see Figure 1)). We infer from this that students perceived their commitment to learning to be negligibly impacted by problems communicating with their international partners and that, as found in previous research of global journalism education efforts, that students remain enthusiastic about working within an internationalized curriculum (Wake 2012), irrespective of the challenges.

Despite the declining levels of course satisfaction, it was clear that the international collaboration contributed to perceptions of professional readiness and skill acquisition with the rating of 3.83 out of 5 to the question, “This subject provided practical learning activities to develop new skills and knowledge I may need in the workplace” (SFS Q8), the third

highest response in the 10-question SFS. The results of the written evaluation analysis also support this data with students developing an awareness of the conditions of journalism practice in other countries that, as evidence of “a global understanding and consciousness” (Ward 2005, 328) is fundamental to the practice of ethical journalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Recommended “guardrails” for future internationalization of journalism curricula**

1. Embed into course content modules on information poverty and the digital divide to raise student awareness of infrastructure issues in international journalism contexts
2. Encourage staff and students to develop a multiple and varied communication environment that accommodates the intercultural, technological and geographical differences of partner countries and formulate a backup plan to communicate with partners in the event of a system slowdown or outage
3. Require students to research social and cultural factors informing journalism practice in their partner country to ensure story relevance and greater awareness of journalists’ working practices

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