World first: MOOC for citizen journalists

Free online course attracts 13,670 enrolments

EXCLUSIVE
By MARGARET SIMONS and DENIS MULLER

FOR 500 years, the privilege of being able to publish news was enjoyed by very few people – those who had access to a printing press or a radio microphone or a TV camera. Now, almost anyone can publish to the world within minutes of finding things out. But is it journalism?

How does a citizen journalist find things out, so they can report facts and news – moving beyond merely braying opinion? And what are the legal and ethical pitfalls to publishing facts that some people might prefer remain secret?

Journalism Skills for Engaged Citizens is a massive open online course (MOOC) designed to teach basic journalism skills to the many citizens who are now taking advantage of new media to publish news, views and information.

The course was taught by Margaret Simons and Denis Muller from the Centre for Advancing Journalism, and ran for eight weeks from 17 August to 11 October. The MOOC was filmed around our fictional town called Newstown. Things are always happening in Newstown – and the story unfolds slowly through the release of news articles, press releases and video content. Students were expected to write, news leads, a news story and an investigative report surrounding the most newsworthy developments in Newstown.

THE content taught in the MOOC was based on core subjects offered in the Master of Journalism at the University of Melbourne: Researching/Writing Stories, Dilemmas in Journalism: Law and Ethics and Investigative Journalism.

The MOOC ran for eight weeks and through more than six hours of video lectures covered critical journalism skills: attribution, verification, news judgment, impartiality, defamation, contempt, ethics and journalistic research. Students learned how to access public records, attend public forums, and use open data and Freedom of Information legislation. Interviewing technique was a key focus.

Students participated in important debates and discussions each week, such as how to deal with confidential sources, what’s in the public interest and what is a journalist in the digital age? Engagement on social media was strong with 703 members in the Facebook Group. The assessments in this MOOC revolved around our fictional town called Newstown. Things are always happening in Newstown – and the story unfolds slowly through the release of news articles, press releases and video content. Students were expected to write, news leads, a news story and an investigative report surrounding the most newsworthy developments in Newstown.

Eighty-four minutes of cinematic video content was filmed and developed by Learning Environments and published on Coursera. The assessments in this MOOC were based on core subjects offered in the Master of Journalism at the University of Melbourne: Researching/Writing Stories, Dilemmas in Journalism: Law and Ethics and Investigative Journalism.

THE assessment for this course was built around four news writing assignments. In the classroom these assignments are marked by sub-editors. But with thousands of assignments to mark during the MOOC students, as peer assessors, assumed the role of marking and sub-editing.

Peer assessments involved using an evaluation rubric which assigned marks for good news values, objectivity, news story structure, verification, attribution and accurate writing.

The Centre for Advancing Journalism is conducting research into how effective peer assessment was in teaching journalism. In particular, how well students’ news writing improved after peer feedback, and how well the rubric measured the quality of writing.

This research will help inform how peer assessment can be used to teach journalism in both the classroom and online. If peer assessments can be used effectively in the classroom, then journalism classes can scale up without the need to have more sub-editors.

A research paper is an expected outcome.