

# **Design of a cross-border course in newsroom management based on blended learning strategies**

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to design a cross-border course in newsroom management, making use of the online solutions to open the areas of sharing experiences between newsrooms from different Arab countries and make that available for students depending on blended learning strategies. The results outline a structure of a graduate course including its objectives, content, learning and assessment methods depending on the qualitative results of analyzing fifteen available courses and eleven modules from twenty-six media schools and four focus groups of media academics and practitioners from nine Arab countries. The paper makes use of the speed up of digital readiness in the region during Covid-19 pandemic when media educators experienced the remote teaching as the only solution under the lockdown, but they also explored the untapped opportunities of communicating borderless. The targeted impact of the paper is to design a course in a practical field issue that witnessed different experiences across newsrooms and make it available for media educators to create cross-countries / cross - regions versions, to open a door for a collaborative methodology of course design that bridge the gap of education quality.

**Keywords:** Newsroom management, blended learning, media education

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## 1. Introduction:

The worldwide lockdown that was imposed because of the WHO declaration of Covid-19 an international pandemic, has put higher education all around the world in a real challenge. Arab countries were obliged to transfer online despite their variation of experiences in the sphere. Although the experiences in the region, were faced by many cultural, technological, professional, and learning process challenges yet at the same time opened for new horizons in methods of higher education teaching. One of the major changes, was the admitting of many Arab countries of the importance to take a step forward and integrate the online education as part of its learning strategies. Some countries, like Egypt had to change some articles of its higher education regulations to consider blended learning as part of learning strategy as a respond the corona virus challenge. (Abdel Hafez, 2020)<sup>1</sup>. Universities in the Arab world began perceiving the importance of adopting blending learning approaches as an enduring learning strategy and not only a temporary solution because of Covid-19. They realized how blended learning can improve the quality of Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) for students. Utilizing BL can benefit students of this pedagogical approach that include: (a) students' mutual assistance and support, (b) the exchange of information and resources, (c) sharing of opinions and points of view, (d) enhanced critical thinking through material discussion, and (e) development of the necessary skills for effective teamwork (Puntambekar, 2006)<sup>2</sup>.

Media Arab schools are part of the higher education system in the region and have their uniqueness in teaching and learning strategies. Despite their different setting of readiness, corona virus has challenged their traditional methods of teaching and paved the way to new strategies. Media have always been characterized by the rapid changes and that learning strategies in the Arab countries can barely cope with these rapid developments. A situation that always created a huge gap between academia and practitioners and accordingly affected the quality of graduates. BL learning offers more integration of technology in the educational process which will lead to

unprecedented opportunity to meet the needs and expectations of the next generations of learners.

On the other hand, BL was utilized by many higher education institutions as a method to pave their way towards international collaborative. Globalization of higher education has become goal four of the Sustainable Development Education Goals 2030. Arab media schools should begin benefitting from this trend to design more cross-border or regional media programs and benefit from each other experiences to have a more qualified media graduate.

One of the main courses, from the researchers' point of view, that demand a real need to design a cross boarder course is newsroom management. In the last decade, newsrooms have witnessed a rapidly increasing technological integration which brought powerful changes in newsrooms. Designing such a course will require collaboration among Arab media educators and practitioners to develop an innovated course that enable students to be fully updated with required knowledge and skills.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential of designing a cross-border course in newsroom management, making use of the online solutions to open the areas of sharing experiences between newsrooms from different countries and make that available for students depending on blended learning strategies

## **2. Reviewing of literature:**

The term blended learning or hybrid learning has been recognized as a combination between face-to face traditional classes and on-line learning which is referred to as all those forms of teaching and learning based on the use of information and communication technology (Clark & Mayer, 2003)<sup>3</sup>.

In this paper we adopt the definition of British Columbia University of blended learning as ““is the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches and techniques. Blended learning involves “rethinking and redesigning the teaching and learning relationship’ (Garrison, D.R. &

N.D. Vaughan, 2008)<sup>4</sup>. According to this definition, we need also to differentiate between distance learning and on-line learning. During the lockdown, most Arab media schools utilized electronic platforms for distance learning using all traditional teaching tools via zoom or teams. In this paper, we refer to on-line learning as the skills related to self-learning, how to use the internet and social media in teaching, how to do video-clips and how to use their e-portfolio and how to utilize life streaming events in teaching as well.

Based on previous definition of concepts, reviewing related literature, demonstrated that many scholars have focused on the importance of blended learning as a revolutionary approach in higher education. Studies in the sphere, mainly adopted a comparative approach. In their research, (Collis & Van Der Wende 2002)<sup>5</sup> probed the importance of utilizing information technology in teaching by interviewing a sample of educators in U.S.A., Australia, and five countries from Europe and concluded a strong emerging interest in BL across these regions. This early research trend continued during the two decades of twenty first century. The comparative approach in these scholarly works were related all the time with an international perspective. A future study targeting experts from around the world (North America, Asia Pacific, Europe and beyond) depended on the Delphi method to ask how BL could support collaborative learning internationally. The study was followed by 7 instructional designers and e-learning experts as well as 235 lecturers as respondents. The results indicated that these experts generally agreed that BL “offers unique opportunities for international collaboration” (So & Bonk, 2010)<sup>6</sup>, though researchers recommended that educators who seek international collaboration need to effectively navigate other complexities of BL. Another in-depth secondary research has been conducted by (Kristian J. Spring and Charles R. Graham 2017)<sup>7</sup> aiming to discover and compare themes of the top blended learning (BL) articles from seven different regions of the world. Top cited articles in BL from these regions show strong similarities in research processes, practice, terminology, and focus, with small differences among the regions. Researchers concluded that these similar patterns demonstrate that themes might promote collaboration and exchange

between regions and that the most cited articles from around the world could fit well within the topical, research, and publication practices of the field.

Evaluating international cooperation among nations by utilizing blending learning methods, continued to be the focal interest to researcher in the sphere. Another research approach in the field concentrated on case studies as learned lessons of evaluation and as important aspect to improve BL experiences among nations. Vaughan & others (2017)<sup>8</sup> conducted their study to compares four international faculty development programs in Canadian, Sweden, South African and Brazil for blended learning to understand the benefits, challenges, lessons learned, and recommendations from such initiatives. The benefits identified for faculty members, who participated in these programs, were that they became more reflective of their teaching practice and began to make a role adjustment from being a content provider to a designer and facilitator of learning for students. The biggest challenge appeared to be a lack of common institutional definition and understanding of blended learning as well as a lack of time and resources to support faculty in the redesign of their courses. In the same context, a significant project “Blended Learning Training for Teachers educators” has been adopted by the European Capacity Building Program. This European program has the aim to foster and increase trans-national cooperation projects between higher education institutions, addressing challenges and cross-cultural awareness. The project involved European countries (France, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia) and Asian countries (Malaysia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan) in a collaborative community capable to reflect on teaching trainers’ practices. Ginestié, J, & Impedovo, M. (2019)<sup>9</sup> indicated that the design of a BL course could help to support a new generation of international teachers, more connected beyond national borders. This resulted supported the UNESCO study (2013)<sup>10</sup> that more international teacher exchange can be strategic to tackle common issues in a wider and more complex vision of the teacher professionalism. The UNESCO has also put into consideration the intercultural competence and its ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions.

On another scope, studies from individual scholars concentrated on documenting and evaluating specific cross-nation collaboration. A research included the development, implementation, and evaluation of a cross-national blended learning seminar on the didactics of biology. The class included three focus topics dealing with different aspects of biology education. The sample comprised students training to be biology teachers at the University of Technology Dortmund in Germany and Hacettepe University in Ankara, Turkey. After completing the class, the results indicated that students evaluated the concept based on their experience and that individual learning, exercises and application ranked higher than online phases, group work, discussions, and information exchange. The positive overall results support efforts to further develop such international teaching concepts (Yaman & Graf, 2010)<sup>11</sup>.

Two other case studies research depended on examining online resources in teaching. The first study utilized digital material as open sources to be used by medical students. The digital included videos, interactive media for didactic knowledge transmission, active in-class activities to enhance the application of knowledge and a joint database for assessment methods. The results of the study affirmed that using flexible multimedia medicine modules for collaboration in blended learning increased students' performance (Bengtsson & others, 2015)<sup>12</sup>. The second study was examining the usage of skype in an international project in which students taking the course Contemporary Issues in Turkish Politics in spring 2011 and fall 2011 at two institutions of higher education, 'Gettysburg College' in the United States and 'Izmir University of Economics' in Turkey, worked together in virtual learning environments to complete various tasks as part of their course work. The results affirmed a higher performance of students in the sphere. (Akbaba, Başkan, 2017)<sup>13</sup>.

The previous literature review highlights two specific remarks, the first that majority of results assured the effectiveness of blended learning in cross-boarders teaching both in survey studies and in project experimental (quasi experiments) studies. The second remark is that studies were mainly applied in applied science sphere and not social science sphere. Studies conducted between the North and South

countries, were between either American \ European on one hand and Asian\ African on the other hand and Arab region was neglected. This study might open-up an opportunity for a project that might be applied among Arab countries.

### **3. Methods:**

This action research is designed develop a hybrid graduate course on newsroom management (NM) across the Arab region utilizing the spread and familiarity of using digital tools for educational purposes after Covid-19. It follows a qualitative methodology to explore the current NM educational practices and collect the perspectives of Arab media practitioners and educators on why, what, and how to teach news management based on blended learning strategies.

The research used qualitative analysis of eleven modules and fifteen courses from twenty-six media schools that offer newsroom management either wholly or partially to outline the current educational practices related to news management. (Appendix I - II)

Along with that, two focus groups of media practitioners with managerial experience were organized to analyze the status quo of newsrooms in the Arab region to identify the needs, skills, issues that should be addressed in the proposed course. 14 practitioners from 8 Arab counties (2 Egypt – 2 Emirates – 1 Tunisia – 2 Morocco – 2 Iraq – 1 Lebanon – 2 Jordan – 2 Palestine) participated in the two focus groups that were held online via Zoom application in March 2022.

Another two focus groups of academics were organized to discuss the suggested topics to be included in the proposed course considering the current educational and professional practices newsrooms in the Arab world, and the suitable learning and assessment methods. Eight academics from seven Arab media schools in six countries (1 Egypt – 1 Emirates – 3 Jordan – 2 Morocco – 1 Lebanon) participated in the two focus groups that were held online via Zoom application in March 2022.

## 4. Results:

### 4.1. The Context of NM education

The analytic results of sampled media schools probed, revealed three main trends of teaching newsroom management. The first trend presented was media management within other courses such as media practicum (College of the Sequoias, USA), or TV news production (Mahidol University International College Thailand) which reflect that many management issues were not probed in the course. The second trend was teaching management courses separately but including only the basics and traditional media management such as traditional leadership, (Wollo University College of Social Sciences and Humanities Department of Journalism and Communication, Ethiopia) and (Temple University USA). The third trend was presenting the digital newsroom as a separate course, but it was mainly related to Western developed countries (NYU Journalism Institute), (Faculty of Communication, Culture and Society, Università Della Svizzera Italiana, Switzerland)

The academics from the nine Arab countries indicated the absence of academic courses that are dedicated for newsroom management except limited number of graduate studies programs which have recently added NM courses. On another level, some media production courses include modules deals management directly or implicitly such as TV production, broadcast journalism, audio production, and advanced TV production.

The participants of academics and practitioners assured the importance of designing a course for NM in the Arab region especially with the growing challenges of news industry that basically rooted to management issues. Whereas they detected three gaps that might impact the effectiveness of NM education in the region looking at:

- The gap between the academic curricula and the professional practices, which undermine the quality of media education courses and its ability to evoke the learners' abilities and aptitudes. That divide deepens because of outdated educational materials and the isolation between the academic and practicing organizations



which negatively impact the training cooperation as well as the field research opportunities as most of newsrooms don't welcome academics and doesn't allow learners to come and observe them especially regarding management and economic matters.

- The gap between the professional practice in the Arab media organizations and the modern newsrooms practices which results a shortage in the local expertise and the opportunities of recruitment later, taking into consideration the recency of the convergent practices in the Arab newsrooms with some exceptions in the Gulf region.
- The gap of capacities between Arab media education systems regarding academic expertise, organizational sources, and media practices. Countries such as Egypt and Lebanon have plenty of academic media programs and an extensive media landscape. on the other side, Morocco – for example - has limited number of media outlets and doesn't have a single faculty of mass communication other than a higher institution for professional qualification and a recently-established sub programs of media in the faculties of arts, laws, and politics. That gap substantially impacts the targeted learning practical skills in terms of research and training resources concerning newsroom management practices.

#### **4.2. Course Objectives:**

Course objectives in the media sampled schools teaching traditional media management concentrated on identifying what management is, what it does, describe and illustrate basic management functions. Students should also be able to combine basic business management principles in a journalistic work environment. (College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida, USA)

While media schools offering digital newsroom, management concentrated on exploring strategies to secure and improve journalistic quality and some of the most innovative approaches to

the economics of journalism and its future. (Università Della Svizzera Italiana Switzerland), develop skills for managing a newsroom, including ethical decision-making, managing information (NYU Journalism Institute).

On the other hand, the approach of setting intended learning outcomes as the key focus of education is the common in Arab media faculties, however turning into competency-based education (CBE) approach was a salient point of argument throughout the focus groups of academics who discussed which approach is more appropriate for an NM course that combines conceptual and professional skills.

While traditional outcomes-based education (OBE) focuses on the summative learning outcomes, CBE concentrates on the graduate behaviors, motivation and personal traits which are crucial for media marketplace and research as well. As CBE-based course envisions how the standard is achieved instead of what is measured, and targets the skills, knowledge and abilities that make the graduates successful in the jobs related to newsroom management, not to complete tasks as students.

According to these considerations, learners are expected to embrace four sets of competencies within an education model that targets learning for knowledge, work, sustainability, and coexistence. These include:

- **Management competencies:** they entail setting plans, structuring newsrooms, designing business models, monetization, organizing responsibilities, managing workflows, assigning tasks effectively, and allocating physical and financial resources. They also imply leadership, negotiation, creative problem solving, and motivation which are crucial in managing innovation industries.
- **News production competencies:** They include creating and developing news content with all its forms and styles along the line from the early point of input processes to the output platforms. This gains in importance in the era of media

convergence where lines between media blur and the concept of integrated newsrooms seems to be a norm.

- **Digital competencies:** They imply dealing with newsroom management systems, developing digital archives, utilizing web analysis platforms, and managing cybersecurity threats. They also require mastering the digital tools of verification and fact checking due to the propagation of disinformation and fake news. In times of pandemic, this set of competencies encompasses telework, directing a virtual workspace and remote management practices.
- **Research competencies:** besides the research standards, this set focus on applying suitable methodologies to conduct newsroom research including ethnographic observations which are extremely rare in the field although they are the most suitable approach to understand newsrooms practices and how they work.

#### 4.3. Course Contents:

Current courses examined from the analytical study, indicated that the content of these courses varied from traditional content basics of media management. It focuses on some conceptual aspects of media management, managerial decision making, the organizational structure of the media, newsroom management, media regulation and self-regulation and the technology and its impact. Topics also cover concepts, issues and methodologies of management and contemporary newsroom management through discussions, readings and guest lectures from newsroom and communication business leaders (Wollo University College of Social Sciences and Humanities Department of Journalism and Communication, Ethiopia) and (College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida, USA)

The focus groups highlighted that it was clear that the problematic situation and context of media systems in the Arab countries casted a shadow over the discussion during the focus groups of practitioners. Issues of press freedom, intermediary competition, professionalism, the professional challenges related to social

media, the development of legacy newsrooms, the economic pressures over journalists, and digitization were salient points of the discussion.

These arguments urged the practitioners to propose practice-based topics to be included in the NM course including convergent newsrooms management, structuring an integrated newsroom, digital capacity building, workflow management, financial management especially in post-covid era, coping strategies to face economic pressures, change management, innovation management, ethical management, newsroom management systems, and managing newsrooms in times of conflict.

On the other side, the academics paid more attention to the knowledge-based topics and bridging the gap between NM academic education and newsrooms' practices considering the nature of the course as it is targeting graduates.

Academics suggests a group of topics including theoretical and conceptual knowledge of news production, modern news ecosystem, types and case studies of newsrooms and business models and economics of modern newsrooms.

#### **4.4. Blended Learning strategies:**

The familiarity of using online communication in the everyday life during the pandemic speeded up the benefits of organizing learning activities regardless the geographical limitations such as hosting guest speakers from other countries and organizing online international seminars. However, the required time and expertise to design a blended course should be considered, as its online and offline classes, activities, and materials takes hours of preparation and training.

Furthermore, traditional instructional strategies should be refined using online tools such as on-demand videos, podcasts, video presentations, live streaming from inside a newsroom, and webinars where guest speakers from different counties can participate simultaneously to present newsrooms experiences.

Given the power of connecting distantly and the course's objective, the focus groups emphasized three leaning strategies as follows:

- **Collaborative learning:** Following an integrated approach, a mix of online and offline collaborative activities can maximize the benefits of regional cooperation through the course. Offline activities such as think-pair-share, role play, and group discussions can be used during the on-site parts of the course to develop critical thinking and problem solving towards newsroom practices. on the other hand, online collaborative activities will enhance exchanging experiences between students from different media faculties across the region, making them to lead the discussion and explore together the impact of the context on newsrooms culture and traditions. Different apps like Microsoft teams and Zoom can be used to organize online small group discussions taking advantage of group chat, breakout rooms, and screen sharing features. Also, online seminars can be organized where students share their own understandings and suggest topics to talk about according to a top-down approach of learning.
- **Experiential Learning:** According to the practical nature of the course, going in field visits, laboratory training and simulations are substantial activities to examine what is happening inside newsrooms and how to utilize newsroom technology solutions through the active cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and doing<sup>14</sup>. These methods require setting agreements and partnerships with the newsrooms to open its doors for the learners to observe workflows and practices on site. They also require recruiting instructors who own both practical experience and academic qualifications to fulfill the requirements of the course.
- **Critical learning:** Reflecting on cases, problems and concepts will help the learners explore the multifaceted context of newsrooms and evaluate their practices in addition to develop autonomous and lifelong-learning mind-set.

#### **4.5. Blended assessment strategies:**

In line with the vision of teaching methods, the focus groups of academics recommended a combination of summative and formative assessment strategies rather than following the summative strategies only to activate a meaningful assessment process during the course.

Building concept maps, observing learners' performance, lab assignments, and peer-review are helpful to monitor learners' progress and identify gaps throughout the course. on the other hand, exams, presentations, and final reports are effective to evaluate learners cumulatively.

These assessments are to be designed in both offline and online forms considering the students concerns towards assessing collaborative work and in engaging in peer assessment activities<sup>15</sup>.

Different applications can be used to design asynchronous or synchronous assessments considering factors of manageability, accessibility, safety, and affordability.

#### **5. Conclusion:**

The core assumption of this paper is questioning to what extent can Arab media schools be capable of designing a cross-border newsroom management media course? Although the researchers were fully aware of the diverse of academic experiences and technical readiness among Arab countries in the sphere, yet the speed-up of transferring to distance learning during the lockdown of Covid 19, opened new opportunities of adopting new teaching approaches. Based on previous results, differences of capabilities are apparent among Arab media schools in methods of designing and implementing NM course, yet schools the (8) sampled Arab media agreed upon the importance of designing a cross-border course. The significance of such agreement might promote collaboration and exchange between selected Arab media schools.

The findings reflected a valuable starting point hence the six Arab countries came up with unified course objectives, blended learning strategies and blended assessment strategies.

On the other hand, blending learning in NM open a door for scholars and practitioners to network with each other. We recommend that kind of exchange will help to develop an updated NM course that enables graduates to work in convergent newsrooms all over the Arab world and not only locally.

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## 7. Appendices

### Appendix I: The analysis sample of full Courses in newsroom management

Faculty, University	Country	Level	Code	Course title	date
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute, New York University	USA	Online Master's Program	JOUR-GA 1261-001	Broadcast Newsroom	2021
College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida	USA	master's level seminar course	MMC 6936	Newsroom Management	2014
Faculty of Communication, Culture and Society, Università della Svizzera italiana	Switzerland	NA	NA	Newsroom Management and Economics of Journalism	2021
School of Journalism, Media, and Performance, University of Central Lancashire	UK	The MA Multimedia Journalism Programme	JN4520	The Newsroom	2022
School of Journalism, Media, and Performance, University of Central Lancashire	UK	MA Broadcast Journalism	JN4502	Broadcast Newsroom	2021
Al Maaref University, Faculty of mass communication and fine arts, Journalism and Digital Media department	Lebanon	Year 4 Senior Standing course	JDM 460	Newsroom Management	NA

Brussels School IHECS, Journalism and communication	Belgium	Master en presse et information, Spécialisation et identité professionnelle	NA	Newsroom Management	NA
Mohammed Bin Rashid School for Communication (MBRSC)	Emirates	Undergraduate - Year 3	JOUR 302	Newsroom management and decision making	NA
the NYU Journalism Institute	USA	NYU NOW: hybrid program	JOUR-GA 1070-002	Digital Newsroom	2021
University of southern California, Annenberg School for Communication	USA	Journalism	471	Newsroom Management	NA
Temple University	USA	Undergraduate – year 3	JRN 3708	Newsroom Management	2022
Mont Royal University	Canada	Undergraduate – year 3	COMM 3404	Senior Roles in the Digital Newsroom	2019
Philip Merrill college of Journalism, University of Maryland	USA	graduate	JOUR763	Seminar in Newsroom Management	NA
Monash University	Australia	undergraduate	ATS1330	Newsroom Practice and theory	2012
Faculty of Humanities, Department of Media Studies, Notre Dame University-Louaize (Ndu)	Lebanon	undergraduate	JOU 371	The Newsroom	NA

## Appendix II: The analysis sample of Course modules in newsroom management

Faculty, University	Country	Level	Code	Course title	Module	date
Amity University, online	India	NA	JMC 644	Television News and Production	Module 1: Understanding TV News	NA
Amity University, online	India	NA	NA	Financial Journalism	Module 1: Introduction to Business Journalism	NA
Amity University, online	India	NA	NA	Sports Journalism	Module 1: Introduction to Sports Journalism	NA
College of Social Sciences and Humanities Department of Journalism and Communication, Wollo University	Ethiopia	Undergraduate - Year 2 - semester2	JoCo2052	Media Management	Chapter Three: Newsroom Management	2020
International College, Mahidol University	Thailand	Undergraduate - Year 3 - semester2	ICTV 354	News and Current Affairs Program	5 - Roles and responsibilities of news team; newsroom management 6-9 - Newsroom practicum: operation of daily news including management, programming, production,	NA

					and presentation	
The college of new jersey, School of the Arts and Communication Journalism and Professional Writing department	USA	Undergraduate - Year 3	JPW 311	News Editing and Production	Newsroom management	NA
Institute of Commercial Management	UK	Qualification Subject	NA	Introduction to Journalism	The Digital newsroom	NA
University Of Mumbai	India	M.A. (Entertainment, Media & Advertising)	PAEM A FT 312	Television & Radio Production & Programming	IV: Newsroom Management	2022
Lebanese American University	Lebanon	Year 4	JSC436	Journalism workshop	Newsroom management	2022
South Plains College Communication Department	USA	NA	COMM 2332	Radio and Television News	The internet and newsroom management computer applications	NA
College of the Sequoias	USA	NA	JOUR 114	Editorial Board	leadership skills, newsroom management	2022