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Professional Research Project: A reflection and evaluation

Abstract

Professional Research Project is a third year course in the Bachelor of Media Arts programme taught at the Waikato Institute of Technology, (Wintec) in Hamilton, New Zealand. This course enables students to engage in a collaborative project with a professional entity in order to provide valuable professional experience and vocational skills. Students are expected to learn and evaluate professional practices in order to provide fresh ideas and techniques that can be used to help them to be more effective and innovative.

The work of five students over the years 2010 and 2011 will be described and analysed in order to provide a reflective evaluation of the range of scopes, research questions and outcomes.

The range of student work includes:

- The Māori round: Iwi and hapū stories.
- Evolution and devolution of news in the age of the web
- Processes in the editing and selecting of letters to the editor
- Styles and effects of blogs
- Scheduling of radio advertising and its links to radio programming

Introduction

Professional Research Project is a fifteen week course which may be undertaken in the last semester of the Bachelor of Media Arts programme, after students have completed their internship. The overall purpose of the course is for students to work with a professional organisation in order to gain experience that will be used to develop specific vocational skills. Students are expected to include an exploration of new ideas.

Learning outcomes include:

- An integrated reflection of process for responding to a research brief
- Knowledge and experience of a specific field of industry
- Development of specific professional skills
- Understanding professional communication
- Values, methodologies and strategies
- Self-evaluation in a professional context

The learning process includes:

- A project brief negotiated with the industry partner and approved by the tutor
- Identification of problems and strategies by the student
- Peer reviews by other students
- Formal presentation by the student of their work

Assessments include a proposal, a log, a presentation and a 3,000 to 5,000 word final report.

The tutor also supports student development of theoretical bases and methodologies such as social research methods; communication theory; semiotics; production, text, reception theory; audience theory; textual analysis and technological determinism.

Student projects

- 1) Austin King. (2011). *An analysis of the practicability of developing a strategic plan of best practice for the coverage of iwi and hapū news.*

Methodology

Interviews of a range of reporting staff as well as iwi and hapū spokespeople. A textual analysis of specific newspaper texts and letters to the editor. Analytical methods include social control, social stratification and normative theory.

Outcomes

there was a range of opinions based on a variety of interests, ie:

- corporate loyalty
- minority viewpoints
- newspaper policy
- journalism codes of ethics

It was suggested that the newspaper discuss the various interests with the range of stakeholders with the intention of encouraging a wider range of representation in the newspaper.

- 2) Harkanwal Singh. (2011). *News in the age of the web: The evolution and devolution of news.*

Methodology

Interviewing newspaper staff about internet publishing policies and practices in terms of presentation and target platforms, online surveys and case studies, reading habits and the changing roles of journalists. The focus is on practical aspects and the challenges of developing news stories and strategies so that they can be placed on the internet. Analyses are based on social research methods.

Outcomes

The understanding of different modes of presentation and how to optimise opportunities provided by the internet, including ways of presenting data journalism.

- 3) Ethan Donnell. (2011). *Letters to the editor: editorial policies for print and online formats and selections.*

Methodology

Interviewing key staff regarding policies and practices. Textual analysis of print and online texts. Analytical methods are communication theory, especially the communication feedback model and production, text, reception theory.

Outcomes

A clear understanding of the editing and selection processes. An exploration of policy regarding the uploading of letters to the newspaper website.

- 4) Kashka Tunstall. (2011). *The effects of online blogs; their roles in influencing and reinforcing readers' opinions.*

Methodology

Initial contact with bloggers. A sample of three blogs; Tumeke!, Kiwiblog and Whale Oil. Analytical methods are the communication feedback model and quantitative evaluations based on positive, neutral, considered and negative responses. The purpose of the research is to discover if readers are mainly reading blogs that they know they will agree with or if they are engaging in actual discussion, ie do blogs change readers' attitudes or just reinforce them.

Outcomes

It proved difficult to determine the influence of blogs. Comments by readers can be grouped quantitatively as positive, negative or dicussive. Qualitative effects are far more difficult to measure. Analyses of traffic by unique page views and visitors showed that most people preferred the more middle of the road site by visits and discussions. The more different sites generated less traffic and less commentary, possibly because viewers agreed with the comments and wanted to be informed on opinion rather than to engage in discussion.

- 5) Ashlee Walsh. *The scheduling of radio advertising and its relationship to radio programming.* (current project)

Methodology

Collection of data regarding advertising and scheduling. An exploration of policies regarding the why and how as well as the who, which, when and where of decision making processes. Analytical methods are a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Proposed outcomes

A clear understanding of the relationships between advertising scheduling and programming of radio items with a view to making suggestions regarding a more precise targeting of market niches.

Conclusions

The five students sampled have chosen Māori affairs reporting, the positioning of news on the internet, the selection of letters to the editor in print and online, the influence of blogs, and the relationships between advertising and programming.

The students have all used a combination of inductive and deductive research, ie;

Inductive – the use of internship and work experience to provide information on which to base a theory.

Deductive – the theory guides the research and findings are tested and explained.

Evaluation

Professional Research Project is an ideal way to follow on from internship in that it enables students to enhance their professional experiences and to think analytically and constructively about their professional practices. The course is also very valuable in providing an opportunity for students to follow up a unique area of interest that would not otherwise be covered in their academic programme.

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