

How low can you go?

Videojournalism - Storytelling, Tools and Techniques

Main Issue: As media are converging, journalists in all media are pressured (usually due to financial constraints, but also as self-employed professionals) to create audio-visual content with inexpensive, versatile and light equipment, to handle every step from planning and shooting to distribution without a team, in a framework referred to as “videojournalism”. This new emerging model is being challenged by traditional approaches to TV journalism in journalism schools.

This tipsheet is a recommendation derived from point n°1 of the State Of The Art report (ten tips guide, p. 17: “Develop training for crossmedia platforms and collaborative work.”

Website: <http://fspac.ubbcluj.ro/jurnalism>

Keywords: videojournalism, equipment, storytelling, video, audio, editing

Courses:	Study program:	Level:	Students
Videojournalism	Journalism	Bachelor	30
TV Workshop	Journalism	Bachelor	15
Visual Storytelling	Media Communication	Master	25

Short description: Based on seventeen years of visual journalism training for journalism BA students, this tipsheet offers concrete tips for visual training of journalism students for a good professional career start in the competitive visual media market.

These tips are based on experiences from the teaching of Television Journalism and Videojournalism at the Journalism Dept., FSPAC, UBB Cluj-Napoca.

For the past six years, 5th semester journalism BA students follow a 12 weeks course on videojournalism, based on the previous knowledge from the TV Journalism course and TV workshop, teaching them to act as a one-person team. The course is very practical, each student working on his/her specific story. By the end of this course, each student must present a completed complex visual story that meets the professional requirements for public display.

This course has the purpose of preparing students to work as complete providers of visual content, as producers, writers, photographers and video editors on their own. This is becoming more and more common as more and more content is demanded by the internet, rather than TV.

The main contributor to this tipsheet is assistant professor Constantin Trofin, course coordinator, former TV producer, presenter and TV executive.

To do	Topic	Teaching method
12 weeks as a basis	Videojournalism	<p>The first four weeks are dedicated to pre-production. During this time, the student must identify and document the story, get permissions and approvals (some stories require such official approvals), meet and talk to subjects, gather archive material.</p> <p>The next six weeks are assigned for production.</p> <p>The last two weeks are for finalizing and trimming visual products, which are to be presented in the final meeting.</p>
Use proper gear in training	Equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DSLR or HD video camera • High resolution Smartphones • Lavalier microphone - makes a good interview sound possible • The handheld directional mike is a must for vox pops, stand-ups or short interviews in noisy environments • The tripod is a must in order to provide a professional look to your visual story
Teach students how to find good stories	Storytelling	Teach students what a good video story is. Not all good stories are also video worthy.
Teach students to know their story	Storytelling	Help students understand and express the FOCUS of the story. You can't tell a story if you don't clearly understand it yourself.
Instruct students to know people and locations	Storytelling	Send students out on the field to personally meet and talk to the characters in their story and evaluate shooting locations. Encourage them to take photos of location for further planning.
Teach students that good video and good audio are not negotiable. Quality makes the difference	Videojournalism	Quality makes the difference between a videojournalist and an amateur. Quality sends better messages.
Teach students to pay special attention to sound quality	Videojournalism	Bad sound can ruin a good story.
Teach them to shoot and take advantage of natural sound bites	Videojournalism	Good, crisp sound bites always enhance the feeling of reality.

To do	Topic	Teaching method
Teach students to take time to shoot steady, well composed shots	Equipment / Tripod	For clean, straight, professional quality look.
Teach students to always use a tripod (unless impossible)	Equipment / Tripod	Demonstrate the use of tripods and insist on the necessity of using them.
If tripod use is impossible, teach them the "human tripod" technique	Equipment / Tripod	Show students and exercise the "human tripod" posture.
Teach students to make best use of ambient light	Video / Use of light	Explain white balance, colour temperature and dominant light. Explain and demonstrate how to use ambient light so that the subject gets the most of key, fill and rim light by direct or reflected light.
Teach students to think and shoot sequences. Teach them how to edit sequences correctly	Video / Sequences	Teach them to "break" actions, match shots, change and adjust angles and framings.
Teach students to shoot camera movements only when necessary	Video	Explain and demonstrate control of camera movements. Uncertain, shaky camera motion diminishes credibility.
Teach students to write after pictures	Audio / voice over	Explain and demonstrate how writing text after editing the voice-over sequence perfectly matches duration and meaning, as a professional outcome. It does not take longer but it looks far more professional.
Teach them to see and take advantage of shooting location opportunities. Take control of the action	Video	Teach them to create the best conditions the environment can provide for their audio and video. Move pieces of furniture, draw curtains, use ambient light, control noises and people moving around. Encourage them to take over and do everything to get the right story.

<p>Teach students to be bold and innovate</p>	<p>Videojournalism / Innovation</p>	<p>Encourage students to experience new things. Ingenuity can solve tricky situations. For example, you can shoot someone from a distance and still get good audio of the voice without wireless equipment by planting a lavalier / lapel mike on the subject, connected to a digital voice recorder slipped into subject's pocket. The audio track can easily be synchronized with video. I successfully used this technique in a student's story about a basketball team coach. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JaQk-WEaFORs</p>
<p>Teach them when and how to use smartphones for video</p>	<p>Equipment / Smartphones</p>	<p>Smartphones are good for wide or detailed shots outdoors or indoors but only in good light. You generally need a microphone if you use it for voice sound bites.</p>
<p>Teach them to use smartphones for action or POV shots</p>	<p>Equipment / Smartphones</p>	<p>Smartphones can stand in for go-pros. If properly secured, they work great. Students must improvise ways to mount them. For instance, a student used a Sony Xperia Z1 to shoot action POV video of a handball player in action. We used an elastic strap bandage to place it on player's chest, with impressive results</p>
<p>Teach them to use selfie sticks for piece-to-camera shots</p>	<p>Equipment / Selfie sticks</p>	<p>Selfie sticks can provide a viable solution for a short piece-to-camera, but only if students use a microphone.</p>
<p>Teach them to carefully plan their shoot</p>	<p>Videojournalism / Planning</p>	<p>Planning is important to maintain situational control in terms of adapting to sometimes-rapid changing situations.</p>
<p>Teach them to do shot lists before scripting for editing</p>	<p>Videojournalism / Planning</p>	<p>Explain to students how to keep track of all their shots and be in control of their own production at all times.</p>

To avoid	Topic	Why?
Avoid working in groups larger than three students	Videojournalism Group/Team	Some students will do all the work while others will stand back. Sometimes they don't want to get involved, but sometimes more eager students won't let them.
Avoid indiscriminate shooting	Videojournalism / Planning	Chaotic shooting will create an editing nightmare with confusing results. Insist on careful planning.
Avoid getting all shots in the final cut	Editing	Teach students to be selective. Selective shooting and selective editing will result in including only the best shots in the edit.
Don't waste time teaching editing software use	Editing	Teach students how to edit, not how to use specific software. That is something they can easily learn by themselves, from numerous tutorials online. It will also make them more involved in the learning process.
Instruct students to avoid using poor quality audio or video	Editing	Teach them to decide if that piece is of MAJOR content value. Otherwise, don't use it.
Never rush in or panic	Videojournalism / Planning	Teach them to always be in control, calm and organized.

OPEN QUESTIONS / DISCLAIMERS

Though videojournalism is by definition an individual enterprise, since students have different levels of visual proficiency and skills, some are able to work individually while others need to be integrated in small groups of a maximum of three students. That helps getting the visual item done, yet prevents some students from really improving skills they are lacking, since somebody else in the group resolves a specific matter.

Recommended resources

Topic/Learning outcome

Salam Father

<http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/witness/2010/01/2010111133239106125.html>

These resources should be regarded as good practice examples. I avoid setting production patterns in order to encourage creativity and the will to innovate

Travis Fox's channel on Vimeo

<http://vimeo.com/travisfox> with examples

Voices from the line <http://vimeo.com/2353800>

Life and Death in Juarez – A Day with the Body Collectors

<http://vimeo.com/3997094>

Small Town Cop Gunned Down <http://vimeo.com/5529211>

The Economy of a Tent City <http://vimeo.com/11482819>

Women on human rights – Darfur

<http://vodpod.com/watch/3026897-darfur-refugee-women-speak-out-risking-life-for-human-rights>

Jim Seida's Boeing story

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/36808301#36808301>

And many other links to professional videojournalists' works

www.insidesthestory.org – Inside the Story – a master class in digital storytelling from people who do it best – a collection of tips from respected videojournalists from around the world

Contact:



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Bonus material:

Short quote from instructor

"This course is basically about self-confidence. The major outcome of this course is that students are being taught to make decisions on their own, to be bold and innovative based on a thorough understanding of capabilities and limitations of technology. Adapting to the story, environment and available technology. Getting the best outcome in the given conditions."

Teaching environment:

