

# FACTFILE:

## GCSE

# JOURNALISM IN THE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY

## UNIT 3: INDUSTRY, THEORY AND PRACTICE



### Conventions of Online Journalism

#### Part 1, Section A: Technology, Conventions and Modern Journalism

#### CONVENTIONS OF ONLINE JOURNALISM

#### Purpose of Factfile?

To enable students to develop knowledge and understanding of online conventions in journalism.

#### Specific Learning Outcomes supported by the FactFile?



Students should be able to identify, consider and define the purpose of the following technical and presentational features and conventions used in online news platforms, and analyse their effectiveness in relation to the target audience:

- page layout including top navigation, tabbed content areas, thumbnails, grid-based layouts, header and sidebar banners;

- colour schemes and typography;
- image selection and placing;
- online multimedia tools used to support a story, for example:
  - videos and podcasts;
  - timelines;
  - maps;
  - image slideshows; and
  - word clouds.
- devices designed to encourage interactivity and engagement with the audience, for example:
  - vox pops;
  - polls;
  - user-generated content; and
  - comments sections.
- devices used to access further coverage of a story, for example:
  - links to further story coverage;
  - links to related current stories;
  - links to related archive stories; and
  - links to live blogs.

#### Target audience? Student? Teacher? Both?

Teachers and Students.

#### How the FactFile supports development of Key Stage 4 Statutory skills?

Opportunities for UICT, PS, WO and Comm throughout.

## FactFile Content

Unit 3 of the GCSE Journalism course is assessed through an online examination, and Section A of the exam draws on students' knowledge of online conventions, among other topics. Students may be asked to explain terminology, offer the correct term for an identified convention or correctly label examples of conventions in use. They must therefore be able to confidently recognise and recall conventions of journalistic media to meet this requirement.

This factfile is intended to clarify definitions related to basic online conventions and offer ideas for further research. Similar factfiles on the conventions of radio, TV and print formats, the role and purpose of journalism, technology and modern journalism, professional roles in journalism and journalism law, regulation and ethics are also available from the CCEA microsite.

## Online Journalism

The evolution of the internet has been the single most influential factor on journalism in recent times, both in its effect on traditional forms of media and its capacity to offer alternative outlets. The speed of reportage, the ease with which stories are shared, the potential for audience interactivity and the space to offer linked articles and multimedia content are all features that have made online journalism seem to overtake its rival platforms.



However, there are definite downsides. For a long time the main complaint about online journalism was the difficulty institutions faced with monetising it in a way that made careers in journalism financially sustainable. Audiences are used to internet content being free, meaning they have turned away from paying for forms like print that generated high revenues for news outlets, but haven't put the same amount of money into paying for the content they now access online.

More recently, this issue has been surpassed by a growing concern for the integrity of online journalism. The proliferation of digital technology available to the average person has certainly led to the rise of 'citizen journalism', in which ordinary people record and report on events they happen to witness. This has given great immediacy to news coverage and created exposure for stories that would otherwise be unknown, but without accountability from the reporter or regulation of the content there is also a strong potential for the spreading of misinformation, unintentionally or otherwise. The trend towards sourcing news coverage from outside established news institutions may have helped contribute to the rise of 'fake news' sites during 2016, a phenomenon compounded by social media algorithms that reinforced 'the bubble' for individual users and showed them only news stories they were likely to agree with based on their social media usage.

The full implications of these more negative aspects of online journalism are yet to be fully appreciated; students of journalism must be ready to approach any online publication with discernment and consideration. What is certainly true is the tremendous power of the medium and its potential to offer wider audiences for journalists and more up-to-date, accessible and multi-faceted content for audiences.

## Conventions of the Medium

The basic conventions of online journalism originate in those of print journalism (early websites were text-heavy and less visually oriented), but because of its wider scope to potentially incorporate elements of TV (eg: video clips or animations) and radio (eg: podcasts or vox pop snippets alongside a written story), there are often additional conventions at play, as well as developments that are specific to the internet medium.

### Interactivity

If there is a primary defining characteristic of online journalism, it is interactivity – the means for audiences to leave comments, vote in polls and easily share content prefaced by their own opinion in the form of a status update or tweet. Some outlets even use these kinds of content as a basis for certain stories themselves, e.g. 'Twitter reacts' to a particular incident). In many cases, particularly for entertainment stories, the journalist will sum up a related question in the final paragraph of

the story and directly invite readers to share their opinion in the comments. This kind of interaction can create a relationship between reader and outlet, a valuable thing in an ever expanding marketplace like the web. When the audience for a particular site feel involved and invested, a kind of brand loyalty can develop and they may become part of that site's online community, allowing the site to generate money from targeted advertising and fundraising campaigns.

### Multimedia

Another unique defining characteristic of online journalism is the provision of multimedia coverage of any one story – combining elements of text, video, audio and photography/graphics to illustrate the narrative. This can function as a way of both enticing skimmers (who may not want to read a full article but will watch a short video, for example) and providing more in-depth coverage for those who want it. Combining these media with links to associated archived stories, live blogs, external sites and op-ed pieces means a reader can easily access a pathway of relevant information related to one story of interest. Other forms of journalism will often direct their audiences to further online content via a hashtag, Twitter handle or web address in order to maximise their links to readers, viewers and listeners.

### Layouts

Earlier web models paid particular attention to layout, with research done as to ways in which the human eye tends to scan a page or screen and corresponding templates like the F-layout and Z-layout being developed and recommended. These are still considered effective and remain widely in use, but with the rise in those who access internet on handheld devices like phones and tablets, responsive design has become the cornerstone of any online news outlet – a website layout that easily rearranges itself to fit a smaller screen. The availability of easy blogging sites like Blogger and Wordpress and straightforward site building services has meant technical expertise in coding and programming is no longer required to create a professional looking website, meaning journalists of every sort can easily maintain their own blog independent of an established news outlet. The democracy offered by this model has been accused of lowering standards and making 'quality' journalism harder to find, but it also provides a multiplicity of voices and affords lesser known journalists a chance to make themselves heard without relying on attracting an editor or following

the rules of a larger institution.

### Attracting readers

The sheer volume of available material online means news outlets must compete for attention. Some traditional newspapers have found a degree of success – and much-needed revenue – in having digital subscribers, but the majority of content remains free to the user, and it's a browser's market. Established sites spend huge amounts of money on search engine optimisation, Adwords and other marketing techniques in order to stay high in the search engine rankings and be easily found by potential audiences. More and more people receive the bulk of their news from social media feeds, so having a strong social media presence linked to individual journalists' accounts and tagged with interested parties is vital for news outlets to maintain and build their readership. Many will also invest in apps for ease of access and to attempt to foster a degree of loyalty from users who, if convinced to download it, will return to it from habit.

As you observe various kinds of online journalism, be aware that some sites seek to foster long-term relationships with readers whereas others compete for more immediate attention per news event, and others attempt to combine both tactics – look for evidence of ways in which these things might be done. The mode of address and supporting media are of course a major part of this, but don't overlook less obvious but equally important factors such as colour schemes, font choices and the presentation of the site overall.

### Example Student Activities:

#### Online Conventions Charades:

One group of 6–8 students assign themselves one part each of a website layout – banner, sidebar, thumbnails, social media links etc. They must then find a way to physically convey to the rest of the class what they are without using the correct term. This may involve lying on the floor in formation (banner at top, sidebar down the side etc.), answering yes/no questions asked by the class, repeating a phrase that conveys what they are (e.g. a bird noise for a Twitter link) or similar. The class guesses what they think each student represents and explains how they knew, linking to their knowledge of layout terminology.

#### Identify, Explain, Evaluate:

Students collate and label screenshots of different news websites and label each element they find.

They then swap with another student who adds the function/reason for each element to the label. The sheet is passed to a third student, who notes on three or more of the labels whether the feature is effective for the site's audience or not, and why they think so.

### **Newspaper Prototype:**

In pairs or threes, students are given a short website remit – a target audience, a style of news and the basic 5W's of a news story. They work together to name the site, design a banner, arrange a layout and present the story in a way that will attract their target audience. This can be done on paper as a poster (with sketches and/or cut out photos) or mocked up digitally, either as an image in a graphics editing program or as a real site using an easy site builder, depending on the preference/prowess of the students themselves. The finished product is presented to the class, with students clearly explaining their choices.



## **Definitions**

Please note that some of the following terms may be found elsewhere with alternative definitions, particularly online. The ever-evolving technology of the internet and shifts in design styles and audiences means some presentational elements have changed over time; some have alternative correctly-termed and interchangeable names, while others have merely been mistakenly defined and the incorrect definition widely propagated by the internet. For the purposes of the exam, these are the terms and definitions that apply and should be learned by Journalism students.

### **Banner**

Not to be confused with the header, a banner is a band spanning the full or partial width of the site and including an image and/or text. In some sites and blogging platforms, banners function

as the title or headline for each individual page (separately from the header), and in news sites they may be added to draw attention to breaking news. For the most part, however, banners are synonymous with advertising and used for promotion of some kind – adverts for a product or service, sponsored content and/or awareness raisers (eg: for fundraising or charitable campaigns). It may appear above, below or even in front of the banner of a site, or cut across an article halfway through so it will be seen as you read.

*Example:* On this screengrab from the Huffington Post, there are banners both above and below the standard site header – the top blue banner entitled 'Obama's first 100 days' to offer a quick link to themed material, and the yellow 'Watch Live' banner beneath to show something happening immediately: <http://bit.ly/2l9bPHw>. An example of a banner advert across the top of the Mail Online homepage: <http://bit.ly/2mC1SPQ>

### **Grid-based layout**

Plenty of sites use a grid based layout – which is just as it sounds, a site design laid out over an invisible grid, aligning material to a number of columns and rows – and news sites are no exception. The main advantages are that grids create an ordered effect, are easy to adapt to mobile and tablet displays, and offer a good template for visual hierarchy, which helps give a sense of the importance of different articles.

*Example:* there are good graphical representations of how grid layouts work and examples of their use at <https://www.sitepoint.com/grid-based-layouts-101/>

### **Header**

The equivalent to a masthead in print, the header is the top section of the page which usually contains the title and/or logo of the site and may also include the main navigation bar, social media favicons and other links (eg: a login button).

*Example:* the long blue header at the top of the Guardian home page, which includes the navigation bar, search function and other links: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk>

### **Navigation bar**

This is the row of links to the site's main pages or topics, which almost always appears at the top of the page and is often integrated into the header. Most news pages keep navigation bars at the top for

consistency across each page, and use a sidebar for the frequently changing list of up-to-date stories.

*Example:* the navigation bar of the Guardian homepage lists its main news categories – UK, World, Politics, Sport etc – and appears on every page as part of the header, allowing easy navigation from section to section: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk>

### Sidebar

A vertical column at one or both sides of the page listing content. It can contain text images or both, and may stay in place or be scrollable depending on the amount of content. Many news sites use a sidebar to list smaller or less significant stories on their homepage or for related content when you click through to a story page.

*Example:* the Belfast Telegraph homepage has a sidebar on the right which lists their most popular stories: <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/>

### Tabbed content areas

Tabbed content is common on news site homepages, which are always packed with information. It offers a way of displaying multiple types of information – several different category lists of top stories, for example – without taking up more space than one list would. The tabs allow the reader to switch between different content in the same space, choosing which category they prefer.

*Example:* this image shows an example of tabbed content on a news site, where readers can select a list of the most emailed, most viewed or most recommended stories: <http://bit.ly/2lwmaJW>

### Thumbnails

Usually used to describe small versions of images accompanying stories in a list, often in a sidebar. Thumbnails can also refer to the ‘frozen’ image used to represent a piece of video footage before it is played.

*Example:* this image shows thumbnails accompanying stories on a newspaper site being viewed via mobile display: <http://bit.ly/2lwNbbB>

### User-generated content

The interactive nature of the web means user-generated content is everywhere – fan art and fan fiction, people uploading photos of themselves using a product to that product’s social media

feed or responses to question threads on forums like Reddit are just some examples. News outlets can utilise user-generated content to cover a story more fully (eg: by using video or photos shot by eyewitnesses to an incident where no journalist was present). The prevalence of smartphones means this happens more and more often, and in certain instances it can allow examination of a story from a whole new angle, giving a sense of immediacy, human interest or popular opinion.

*Example:* this article and video clearly explain the purpose and effect of UGC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/article/art20150922112641140>

## Questions to consider?

- Which sites/forms of online journalism are most likely to use the each of the features above, and in what context?
- Why are different features used by different sites and apps? How do they affect the stories’ modes of address in each instance?
- Can I recognise examples of each online journalism feature named above and correctly identify it in a variety of contexts?

## Additional information sources

### Journalism.co.uk

<https://www.journalism.co.uk/>

### Writing for the web

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/article/art20130702112133610>

### Visual Hierarchy: Eye-scanning patterns and web layouts

<http://thehipperelement.com/post/73602783776/daily-ux-crash-course-17-of-31>

### Log into Online Journalism

<https://www.theguardian.com/careers/best-of-the-forums-online-journalism>

### What makes good online journalism

<https://www.quora.com/What-makes-good-online-journalism-and-why>

### The Handbook of Global Online Journalism

<https://books.google.co.uk/>

