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# Unpacking Value Creation Dynamics in Journalism Education. A Covid-19 Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

The physical closure of universities and university colleges due to Covid-19 has accelerated the digitalization of journalism teaching to a record speed. The pandemic, and the severe restrictions on-campus attendance, radically altered J schools' value proposition to their students, turning the teaching of practical journalistic skills primarily into a forced blended learning experience. This study, through proposing a conceptual model for unpacking value creation dynamics in journalism education, explores this shift and how journalism students responded to it. We find, through applying the model to a multiplatform journalism course at the bachelor level, that the online teaching environment was experienced as being inferior to physical teaching, despite the availability of flexible digital learning resources that students could use at their convenience. Ample opportunities for online interaction between students and teachers were not a satisfactory substitute for physical campus teaching. This study questions how, based on this, face-to-face interaction between journalism students and teachers best can be replaced, especially in terms of creating a safe learning environment and facilitating students' learning by doing.

## KEYWORDS

Journalism education; Covid-19; pedagogical newsroom; blended learning; proposed value; perceived value; value co-creation

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has been described as a critical incident in journalism which has spotlighted journalistic rules, roles, and routines of the profession (Tandoc Jr et al. 2020). Similarly, the pandemic represents a critical incident in journalism education. J schools were forced, almost overnight, to move teaching from physical into digital spaces, losing access to campus classrooms and production equipment, face-to-face interaction between students and teachers, and the opportunity for students to move freely in their community to interview sources and make visual and audio recordings in physical spaces (Fowler-Watt et al. 2020). The pandemic presented journalism teaching with

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unparalleled challenges. It also may, however, have moved journalism education more permanently in a digital direction.

We use the pandemic to explore how journalism students reacted to physical teaching resources being replaced by digital resources, which teaching resources the students found valuable and which not, and the role of digital teaching resources in encouraging or discouraging students to engage as active contributors in their own learning experience. The *forced* blended learning situation resulting from the pandemic should not mistakenly be treated or interpreted as any other blended learning setting which typically combines online and face-to-face learning. Due to the sudden digitalization of teaching, it was not possible to adhere to blended learning ideals of carefully setting the threshold for digital versus face-to-face teaching and preparing participants properly for digital activities. Still, this emergency teaching environment serves as a catalyst that foregrounds the possibilities and pitfalls of digital teaching and encourages reflection on how to improve teaching practices following the crisis.

Unpacking the factors that influence journalist student experiences of J schools have become an urgent matter in an educational system that, despite its noncommercial nature, is increasingly focused on attracting and satisfying students. Value co-creation theory, originating from the service management literature, is a theoretical perspective that can shed light on these processes. This study, through combining value co-creation perspectives with the research literature on digital teaching, makes two distinct contributions. First, it introduces a conceptual model for examining value co-creation dynamics between J schools and journalism students. Second, this model is applied to assess the teaching of practical journalism during Covid-19.

This research adds a new perspective to the study of journalism education, through focusing on journalism students as active co-creators of value in the process of learning journalistic skills. Students are not primarily seen as passive recipients of teaching but as *active contributors* to the learning experience and to the innovation and improvement of teaching (e.g., Dollinger, Lodge, and Coates 2018). Students have shown an interest in playing a more active role as partners in the learning process (Bovill and Felten 2016). Technological advances have also expanded the opportunities for more personalized, interactive and self-paced learning experiences online (Graham 2006), giving students a more active role in the shaping of their own learning path. This is typically the case with blended learning, where students have some control over their learning through being provided with the opportunity to adapt the learning materials and the time and place of learning to their individual needs and preferences (Spanjers et al. 2015). We aim, through linking journalism education research with blended learning and value co-creation theory, to extend the understanding of the learning of practical journalism as a joint effort between J schools and their students. We introduce a two-sided value creation model that combines the journalist educator's *value proposition*, and journalism students' *perceived value-in-use*. We then, through applying this model, explore a multiplatform journalism course at the bachelor level in which students receive training in practical journalism via a "pedagogical newsroom" (Jaakkola 2018). This course was rapidly transformed in the fall of 2020 and, due to Covid-19, into a forced blended learning regime with an increasing emphasis on digital only teaching. We consider the course to be the education institution's *value proposition* to students, and the students' response to be the *perceived value-in-use* of this value proposition. The interplay between the two

affects value co-creation, and ultimately student learning. The two-sided model is based on four crucial factors for successful blended learning: proposed and perceived *flexibility* in the time and space of learning, *interaction* between students and instructors, *self-regulation* of students and *affective learning conditions* (Boelens, De Wever, and Voet 2017).

Our empirical data demonstrates that journalism students found self-regulation and affective learning to be particularly challenging amid the crisis. Ample opportunities for online interaction between journalism students and teachers was not a satisfactory substitute for physical on-campus training, this loss having a negative impact on value co-creation. Bearing in mind that the corona crisis has been an extreme situation with an unavoidable impact on our findings, we posit that insights from this study provide guidance for future digitalization of journalism education, particularly in terms of creating a safe learning environment, facilitating students' opportunity to learn by doing, building student commitment and detecting struggling students.

We, in the next section, review relevant value co-creation and blended learning literature and relate this to journalism education in Scandinavia, the development of our co-creation model for journalism education being based on this. Then we introduce the research questions for our empirical study, describe our Covid-19 case, outline the methodology, and present and discuss findings.

## Literature

Value co-creation, value propositions and perceived value-in-use in journalism education.

Applying value creation perspectives from the service and service management literature and determining the value of journalism education via the individual student in their capacity as consumers (Grönroos and Ravald 2011), might seem like an unusual way of studying journalism education. Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009) argue that the "student as consumer" metaphor and the marketization of education promote a mode of existence in which students seek to obtain a degree that will grant them a well-paid job, rather than "being learners" and receiving the opportunity to be trained in abstraction, critical thought and theory. The market discourse also encourages education as a product notion that is delivered to students, indicators of education quality being based on assessment regimes of simple student satisfaction scores (see e.g., Díaz-Méndez and Gummesson 2012). Value co-creation perspectives, however, offer an alternative approach. Students are seen, in this view, to be active contributors to the learning experience and to the innovation and improvement of the teaching. This resonates well with the tradition of Nordic journalism schools (e.g., Dahlstrøm 2016; Jaakkola 2018), the teaching in these schools typically being based on theories of active, student-centered learning and on concrete, hands-on practical experience and reflection (see, for example, Gynnild 2017 for overview). This training often takes place in what Jaakkola (2018) calls the pedagogical newsroom, which is a version of Schön's (1988) practicum. Students learn by doing and, under close supervision, in a constructed context that is similar to that of the practice world (Schön 1988, 37). Most practicums, unlike traditional classroom instruction, involve groups of students who are often as important to each other as the instructor, students sometimes even assuming the instructor's role. The instructors may, from time to time, teach in the conventional sense by communicating information, advocating theories, and describing examples of practice. They, for most

of the time, however, demonstrate, advise, question and critique (Schön 1988, 38). Journalistic content production in the typical pedagogical newsroom (Jaakkola 2018) is therefore coupled with learning, students working together to acquire basic journalistic skills and to gain a deeper reflective understanding of journalistic practice (193).

The traditional lecturing view of learning in which “knowledge” is transferred from teacher to students is considered to be insufficient to ensure the productive learning of journalism skills (Gynnild 2017). The ideal is to instead develop students, through experiential learning and personalized teaching, into self-initiating, self-directed learners. This aligns with value co-creation theory, which holds that organizations cannot deliver value, only *value propositions*, that is, a potential value that the receiver can experience from the offering (Lusch and Vargo 2014). This means, in the context of journalism education, that teachers can only propose value to students by offering teaching resources that constitute a value proposition to them. These resources have no value in and of themselves, value only being co-created when students engage with these resources as so-called “resource integrators” (Lusch and Vargo 2014) and experience the teaching as valuable in the achievement of their individual goals. Students, in other words, play an active role in creating the value of the university service (Díaz-Méndez and Gummesson 2012). This has been conceptualized as *value-in-use* (Lusch and Vargo 2014) or perceived value-in-use. The latter emphasizes the individual, experiential aspect of the value-in-use concept. This experiential evaluation can be positive or negative (Medberg and Grönroos 2020). Perceived value-in-use is, in education such as journalism training, a result of the conjunction of teaching quality and the students’ individual learning capabilities (Díaz-Méndez and Gummesson 2012). Value co-creation perspectives, through emphasizing the students’ role of contributor to the learning experience and to the innovation and improvement of the teaching, provide a fruitful supplement to the ideals of Nordic journalism education.

### ***The Value of the Pedagogical Newsroom***

Professional knowledge literature often makes a distinction between theoretical knowledge (“knowing what”) and practical knowledge (“knowing how”) (Abbott 1988; Benner 1984; Freidson 2007; Parsons and Platt 1973). Formal knowledge/theoretical knowledge is composed of bodies of information and ideas that are organized by theories and abstract concepts. Practical knowledge/working knowledge, however, exclusively addresses the accomplishment of work (Freidson 2007, 31–34). Value in the context of journalism education can therefore be described as being the acquisition of the *thinking* skills and the *practical* skills required to conduct journalistic work, student activation of these two value dimensions resulting in perceived value-in-use. Dollinger, Lodge, and Coates (2018) found, in their review of research in this field, that student experience and the personalization of the teaching institution’s value proposition are key elements of student perception of value-in-use. The relationship the students engage in with the teaching organization, including fellow students, is therefore of great importance. Quoting Ranjan and Read (2016) Dollinger, Lodge, and Coates (2018) describe value-in-use as the “lived or joint reality of use and experience” of students (216). In line with the principles of Schön’s practicum and the pedagogical newsroom described above, active participation and cooperation among students is a prerequisite for the activation

of students' thinking and practical skills. Student involvement is thus the key element of the value proposition of pedagogical newsrooms, students furthermore actively shaping the value proposition by engaging with their peers. The value offered to the students by the education institution is therefore directly affected by the students' individual contributions to the learning environment (Dollinger, Lodge, and Coates 2018). Education is, in this perspective, considered to be a *partnership* between the student and the educational organization.

Active student involvement in value co-creation can include online and off-line activities. The campus teaching restrictions brought about in the spring of 2020 by the corona pandemic, meant an increasing emphasis on remote digital teaching and the digitalization of teaching programs (Frisem 2020). The wider social implications of the pandemic encouraged new pedagogic practices in virtual spaces, hierarchies being flattened for students and staff alike and established professional standards being challenged by the "new normal" of social distancing, changed newsroom environments and a renewed focus on journalism's civic role (Fowler-Watt et al. 2020). Calls were also made for a pedagogy of compassion to ease student stress (Auerbach and Hall 2020).

This transformation put the value proposition of journalism educators to the test (Vartanova and Lukina 2021), the factors that have proven important in successful blended learning being tested in particular. By blended learning, we understand a combination of online and face-to-face learning, including asynchronous and synchronous online activities (Hrastinski 2019). This defines "a major segment of a continuum between fully online, at-a-distance courses, and fully face-to-face courses that use few or no Internet-based resources" (Watson 2008, 7). Boelens, De Wever, and Voet (2017) describe four blended learning success factors based on an extensive literature review, *flexibility*, *interaction* between students and instructors, *self-regulation* among students and *affective learning* conditions. Flexibility, as described by Horn and Staker (2014), means that students have some control of the *time*, *place*, *path* or *pace* of learning, asynchronous, digital communication allowing students to be anywhere in the world, to engage with the learning resources at a point in time chosen by them (Osguthorpe and Graham 2003) and to decide the order and pace at which they engage with the learning resources. They can also choose between face-to-face learning, online learning or instructional activities (Owston, York, and Murtha 2013). This is important, as findings of previous studies have shown that many learners want the flexibility of the blended learning method but do not want to lose the social interaction and human contact they are used to in a face-to-face environment (Graham 2006). Boelens, De Wever, and Voet (2017) describe how transactional distance can hamper social interaction in digital only teaching. Mixing digital and physical elements in a blended learning environment could, however, remedy this problem by enabling both verbal and non-verbal communication in certain parts of the course (Osguthorpe and Graham 2003). Boelens, De Wever, and Voet (2017) also describe ways to help students regulate their learning, including *orienting and planning* (i.e., prepare and design the learning process through learning tasks and goals that are in line with prior knowledge or time constraints), *monitoring and adjusting* (i.e., observe whether the learning process progresses according to plan and adjust where required) and *evaluating* (i.e., assess the learning process and final learning outcome). *Affective learning* conditions also include a subset of strategies that range from motivation and dealing with emotions (i.e., building and maintaining a willingness to

learn and feelings of well-being, self-efficacy and commitment), to attributing learning outcomes to causal factors, developing judgments about oneself as a learner, and to attaching subjective values to learning tasks that result in students' willingness to invest energy (Ibid).

### ***Unpacking Value Co-creation in Blended Learning Journalism Teaching***

We, based on the literature presented in the previous sections, suggest a framework for unpacking value co-creation among journalism students in a blended learning environment. The four blended learning challenges (flexibility, interaction, self-regulation and affective learning) are treated as key aspects of value co-creation between journalism educators and students. We relate each of these aspects to the two key concepts in the learning process – value proposition and perceived value-in-use. We specifically suggest a two-sided model that unpacks the integration of the four aspects into the blended learning value proposition on one side, and journalism students' experience of these four aspects in the teaching on the other (the perceived value-in-use). It is again important to emphasize the reciprocal and dynamic relationship between the two sides of this analytical framework. Value co-creation is a joint effort between the J school and the students, students being both recipients of and contributors to the value proposition. Such value co-creation will facilitate learning, and stimulate student satisfaction, this benefiting both the students and the J school. Value propositions that are not perceived as being valuable, that is, where perceived value-in-use among students is low, will have a negative impact on value co-creation and on learning outcomes.

We will apply this framework, in the remainder of this study, to the examination of value co-creation in a practical journalism course, turned into a forced blended learning course and pivoting towards a full digital modality with synchronous and asynchronous online elements in the wake of rising Covid-19 cases. The pandemic is, therefore, in our study, the overarching context for value co-creation between journalism students and the J school. It is important to emphasize this context as it had a crucial impact on value co-creation dynamics. We address the following research questions based on this premise:

- RQ1:** How was flexibility, interaction, self-regulation and affective learning integrated with the learning resources provided to the journalism students, that is, the journalism educator's value proposition?
- RQ2:** How did the students experience the flexibility, interaction, self-regulation and affective learning aspects of the value proposition, that is, the journalism students' perceived value-in-use?

### **Materials and Methods**

This study is inspired by participatory action research (PAR) and based on reflection, data collection, and action to promote understanding and improve students' experiences (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006). The goal of PAR can be described as being to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, through participation with

those providing the service, to pursue practical solutions to pressing concerns among involved parties (Reason and Bradbury-Huang 2007). The approach has, therefore, often been used within an educational context in attempts to manage the tension between educational theory and classroom practice, and to explore the shift to a more dialogical approach to teaching (Reason and Bradbury 2008).

The authors of this paper were all, in the fall of 2020, affiliated with a practical oriented journalism course for first-year bachelor students at a higher education institution in Norway, all teaching multiplatform skills to the students. The course, designed by the course instructor, had implemented some blended learning elements prior to the corona crisis (e.g., online instruction videos). In early 2020 extensive additional online resources were prepared in the event of campus access restriction or closure. The teachers who co-taught the course had little or no previous specialization in blended learning, except basic training in how to create and execute online or hybrid courses. Against this background, we wanted to better understand the interplay between the J school's value proposition and students' perceived value of the teaching and how this affected value co-creation. A case study of the course was therefore initiated based on this interest. The course can be described as being the typical pedagogical newsroom (PN) of Nordic journalism schools (Jaakkola 2018), in which students are encouraged to learn from each other, experiment with journalism, and to invent new forms of production (ibid). We find this innovative PN tradition to be of particular interest in the study of the reciprocal and dynamic relationship of value co-creation.

Case studies are believed to be useful in the study of human affairs and are focused on small groups, communities, decisions, programs, organizational change, or specific events over time (Yin 2014). The small unit of analysis allows complex social phenomena to be understood (Yin 2014). A case study also seeks to develop more general theoretical statements about regularities in the observed phenomena that extend beyond the specific case. This is based on the assumption that knowledge of a phenomenon can be acquired from the intensive exploration of a single case (Becker 1970). The assumption, therefore, is, in this case, that detailed information on proposed and perceived value-in-use in a time of rapid change obtained from a single case, can broaden the knowledge of value co-creation in journalism education. This knowledge can, where inspired by the goals of participatory action research, stimulate and improve future value co-creation between journalism students and teachers.

### ***Empirical Material***

The empirical material used to answer RQ1 (journalism educator's value proposition) is the course material on the Canvas digital learning platform. Supplementing this, the eight-course teachers (including the three authors of this paper) were asked to keep a digital "course diary" and take notes on teaching objectives (for example, developing students' sourcing skills), how successful it was and how the teaching could have been improved.

To answer RQ2 (journalism students' perceived value-in-use), we used the teachers' observations of the students (as described in the diaries), and a two-hour digital semi-structured group interview with eight students, each representing one of the course's eight student groups. Six of the students were selected by their peers, two being recruited

by the teachers. The student informants were briefed about the interview topics in advance and asked to confer with their peers to collect feedback on the course. The semi-structured interview, which lasted for approximately two hours, was conducted on the Zoom digital platform. Questions were asked by the two researchers that were least involved in the teaching, the researcher responsible for the course playing an observer role. Detailed notes were taken during the interview by all three researchers present, providing a basis for comparison. The student-evaluation of the course, which was as an online survey open to all students, was also analyzed. All interview data and teacher diary data were anonymized in accordance with The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees' guidelines. The entire data material made up of the course material, the diaries, the interview notes and the student-evaluation, was examined in accordance with the above-presented model for value co-creation dynamics to uncover value proposition elements and perceived value-in-use based on the four blended learning challenges (flexibility, interaction, self-regulation and affective learning). The aim of this process was to explore whether the empirical material corresponded with the theoretical framework developed.

### ***The Insider Role***

The insider role of the authors of this paper gave advantages, these including easier access to informants and knowledge of context and internal codes. This allowed us to ask more precise questions when collecting data and conducting the analysis (Støkken and Nylehn 2002, 210). Negative aspects, however, include a lack of analytical distance, over-identification with interviewees, and forgetting to problematize the customary, which are known challenges when conducting research in one's own field (Støkken and Nylehn 2002). Respondent answers may also have been influenced by bias. Students being interviewed by their course teachers may have led to favorable descriptions and to students withholding information (Bryman 2008, 211). We have tried to be open and conscious about the role and its implications, and make implicit normative stances explicit, to minimize the negative aspects of the insider role (Henriksen 2011, 78). We have also actively reflected on our individual roles when interacting with respondents, the empirical material and the theoretical perspectives. We believe this has increased the credibility of our findings.

## **Results**

The following sections are organized according to our two RQs. First, we present findings on flexibility, interaction, self-regulation and affective learning in the value proposition to journalism students and relate this to the wider context of the pandemic. Then we turn to the journalism students' perceived value-in-use and how they experienced these four aspects in the blended learning journalism course forced by Covid-19.

### ***Value Proposition***

*Flexibility.* The first-year journalism course included six weeks of news production, the focus being on radio, video and still photography published online. Teaching resources

normally are based on a rotation structure, radio lectures being given during the radio week, video lectures during the video week, etc. However, moving teaching online due to Covid-19 meant that all the resources for all the media platforms were made available to all the students at the same time. This provided students with greater learning path flexibility. The course material was digitized and provided in different formats on a variety of platforms (e.g., podcasts, web tutorials and prerecorded lectures). This, under normal circumstances, would have provided flexibility in time and place of learning. However, restricted campus access before full lock-down meant that flexibility in place and instruction format was severely limited. Prior to full lock-down, quotas of students were allowed access to campus and could choose between onsite or online learning. However, only online learning was permitted towards the end of the course. Extra teaching assistants were provided to compensate for this. They could be contacted by e-mail, phone or Facebook Messenger etc. and could help with equipment or other practical problems. The teachers' diaries show that some teachers also told students that they could get in touch "whenever they needed". This level of flexibility, however, created problems with their allotted course teaching hours.

*Interaction.* Student-to-student interaction was based on students working together as a newsroom and on regular editorial meetings. One of the students in each of the six student groups was designated production editor, this student being responsible for overseeing journalistic production, managing group meetings and supervising newsroom participants throughout the day. This interaction, due to Covid-19 restrictions, mainly took place on Zoom. Additional digital communication on Facebook and Snapchat was also set up by the student groups themselves. Students also participated in online feedback meetings, in which each student's journalistic products were assessed. The value proposition of this blended learning course, therefore, relied heavily on the digital interaction between students. Teacher-student interaction was via a designated journalism teacher who oversaw the interaction between the students and provided guidance on journalistic questions (e.g., how to reach relevant sources or solve ethical issues) and on technical problems. The teacher diaries show that the Zoom-platform created interaction challenges. For example, there were concerns around passive students who turned off their cameras, so appearing as "black screens" in Zoom meetings. There were also problems with students "talking over each other", which made the digital conversation awkward. Other diary entries, however, describe a well-functioning digital interaction. As one of the teachers stated: "I'm generally happy with how the interaction between students has turned out, both in terms of sharing ideas and technical support". This suggests that the quality of the interaction element of the value proposition varied between student groups.

*Self-regulation.* Both the complex structure of the course and students being novices presented challenges to the digitalization of the course material. A multitude of digital teaching resources was therefore used to encourage students to familiarize themselves with the course and its requirements. This included a plenary course introduction on Zoom, digital quizzes and online tutorials. A summary of the entire course and all the course learning resources was made available in an interactive Google document called the "Master Document". The aim of this was to provide students and teachers with easy access to all relevant information on the course. The student group was also continuously monitored by the teachers, their observations being shared in the collaborative,

digital teachers' diary. Monitoring revealed that many students were struggling to meet the journalistic production requirements. The number of mandatory assignments was therefore reduced. The quality threshold for passing assignments was also lowered due to students finding it increasingly difficult to interview sources and create news stories under the pandemic restrictions. The evaluation element of the course was therefore adjusted as a result of Covid-19. The overall concept of the course, however, remained unchanged, students producing journalistic content for evaluation by peers and teachers.

*Affective Learning.* This aspect of a blended learning value proposition was, in the context of Covid-19, particularly challenging. As one post in the teacher diary observed: "The students say they are tired and that they are struggling with motivation". Another post describes the teacher finding it increasingly challenging to "pull tired students through the course and motivate them". The teachers conducted a midcourse survey, which revealed that more than half the students felt isolated, depressed or lonely. Three student activities were therefore implemented to address the collective low spirit among the students. First, a one-to-one telephone conversation with each course student, to ask them how they were coping. Secondly, a Padlet of inspirational, happy, and positive posts was introduced, teachers and students contributing content. Thirdly, a "walk and talk" Christmas calendar, students being assigned one fellow student and a creative conversation topic as a calendar gift. The course had, as described above and in addition to these ad hoc arrangements, a formalized structure for teacher–student and student–student feedback. Students were encouraged in this to reflect on their own experiences, their working conditions and their work outcomes. Assisting students in attributing learning outcomes to causal factors became a central element of these meetings.

### ***Perceived Value-in-Use***

*Flexibility.* The heavy restrictions on-campus attendance during Covid-19 meant that students did not experience the blended learning environment as being particularly flexible in terms of place of learning. Interviews with students and teachers' course observations showed that students would have preferred physical teaching, and that they experienced remote learning as being inferior to physical classes. In the words of one of the students "digital teaching can never be as good as physical teaching in a course that is based on substantial informal learning".

Some students described some of the advantages of online resources such as instructional videos and online lectures on-demand, thus giving them the time of learning flexibility. Most student feedback, however, suggested that time and place flexibility was a drawback that negatively affected learning. The students expressed that they preferred face-to-face teaching on campus and voiced their frustration over the short length of campus slots at the beginning of the program, and over the full closure of the campus at the end of the program. Supplementary online teaching material such as prerecorded instruction videos was not experienced as being a sufficient substitute for longer on-campus learning slots. As one student expressed on the radio teaching:

We could only attend campus for three days, to learn the radio editing program. It was not enough, even though we had watched the instruction videos online. A lot of learning is about

testing how things work. You can't learn at your own pace when only three days are available for practicing.

The students either did not see themselves as being in control of the pace and path of learning, or they did not want to be in control. The comments from the student group revealed that they had not engaged extensively with the online course material available. "There were course resources on Canvas [the online learning platform]. But during the course, it was hard to find time for this material. It's hard to learn at your own pace when time is so tight", one student said. The attempt to gather all relevant information on the course into one online "Master Document" that could be accessed from anywhere at any time was perceived to be overwhelming. This was described in the following quote from the teachers' notes: "None of the students (let alone me) had full oversight of all the details in this 'Master Document' and all information on the course".

There was, however, full agreement among the students on the fixed morning meetings. This was something they said they could relate to everyday, something that kept them "on track". As one student described: "It's not just about being motivated by learning from the others in the group. It's about getting up in the morning and having a fixed meeting point. That's very motivational".

Student participation was, however, according to the teachers' notes, uneven. The teachers worried that the option to work at home, of not attending fixed online meetings, of keeping silent in online meetings with the screen turned off, and the extensive pool of online resources that only some students were able to take onboard deepened the divide between strong and weak students. As described by one of the teachers:

It is often, in the current situation, the most engaged and talented students who attend the teaching. They engage in the course and are more closely supervised by the teachers. This makes it more difficult for us to identify low motivation students when they are working from home. We could more easily spot students who were struggling when all students were on campus, and then help them move forward. Now the gap between the strongest and weakest students can become much more pronounced.

*Interaction.* The interviews revealed mixed experiences of the student-teacher interaction. The students appreciated that teachers could be reached on the phone or by e-mail throughout the day, as shown by this quote: "I have found the teachers to be very accessible during the course. They could be reached throughout the day – from 8 to 16, even later if necessary. I talked to one of the teachers at seven in the evening".

The lack of face-to-face interaction on-campus was, however, also seen to raise the threshold for seeking help and assistance from teachers, and therefore as an obstacle to swift problem-solving. One of the students put it like this:

There is something about the loss of human interaction. Calling your teacher on the phone is a barrier. I've never called a teacher at home before. It's much easier to ask a question when they are in the room [...] So my learning has been affected negatively. I have gained less from the course than I would have from on campus teaching.

The student-to-student interaction on digital platforms, and the face-to-face interaction when allowed, was emphasized as being a particularly valuable aspect of the course. One of the students sums up their appreciation of the group work as follows: "The contact and cooperation with other students were invaluable. The editorial

groups have been so great. To be able to discuss your work with ten other students ... Without it, things would have been extremely difficult for everybody”.

There were also some indications in the material that student-to-student interaction, despite being perceived as valuable, could not replace student-teacher interaction. “The editorial groups have been a fantastic initiative and I feel they have helped me work well. It is not, however, the same as getting proper guidance from a teacher”, as one of the students said.

*Self-regulation.* One of the main points students made when describing self-regulation factors, was the link between motivation and being together as a student group. The students emphasized that Covid-19 restrictions had a negative effect on their learning motivation, and therefore their ability to self-regulate. The students also called for better information on what items on the syllabus they should read for different parts of the course. They also called for a more intuitive online overview of the course. Finding one’s way through the course was experienced, as was succinctly described in the student interviews, as being “a right kerfuffle”. The teachers’ diaries confirm that there was a lot of confusion among the students on practicalities and formal course requirements.

Most students were satisfied with the monitoring of their work and how work requirements were adjusted during the course, as was described by one student: “When we had problems, the teachers were responsive and adjusted course requirements. The number of mandatory assignments was reduced in the last phase of the course, which was really well received”. Some students were, however, frustrated about lower journalistic production expectations. These students described, in the interviews, how less demanding work requirements made some of them lazy. They also questioned the learning outcome when more or less everything they handed in was approved: “The teachers have been generous when our stories have not panned out as planned due to the Covid-19 situation. The learning outcome has, however, not been the same, as I was not able to do things properly”, one student said.

*Affective Learning.* The students expressed, in the interviews, their gratitude for teachers calling them individually and asking them how they were doing. The telephone calls, which lasted from five minutes and up to one hour, were perceived as being an act of compassion in which the teachers showed that they cared about their students’ well-being. As described by one student:

I think it was really nice of the teacher to call us. It was good to talk about how I was doing. It’s not necessarily easy to bring up these things in the student group. It’s the ultimate sign of weakness – that you’re feeling crap. So that was really good for me.

Some students did, however, not experience the teachers as being sufficiently compassionate. They described feeling high levels of pressure and stress, which made it more difficult to cope with the already challenging Covid-19 situation. Some students felt that this stress was caused by teachers pushing them too hard, for example, in reaching out to interview sources. “I know of people on the course who cried because they could not do what the teachers asked them to do. Some people can cope with being pushed. Others can’t. Everything becoming digital has made it more challenging for teachers to capture how we receive their feedback”, said one of the students.

Working digitally from home without the support of the collective on campus also made students more nervous and uncomfortable when reaching out to interview sources. As put by one student: “It’s so much easier to pick up the phone and call a source from the newsroom than to make a call from your bedroom on your own”.

There were, however, students who emphasized the benefit of being challenged. They experienced the teachers as pushing them “in a positive way”, stimulating them to find solutions when they encountered problems. This was perceived as being an important aspect of becoming a journalist. “If you’re not pushed to contact an interview source in this course, then when are you going to learn?”, one quote read. Another student, supplementing this, said: “It’s important to experience insecurity. It’s part of the game”.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Just like newsrooms around the world have been encouraged to evaluate which digital working practices to maintain after the pandemic, J schools should also assess the threats and opportunities of digitalized practical journalism education based on the Covid-19 experiences. However, in doing so, one must carefully take into consideration the abnormality of the situation, such as heightened levels of insecurity and stress among students and J school staff, the unpredictability of teaching modality and other confounding variables creating sources of disruption that do not exist in blended learning environments in non-pandemic conditions. With this in mind, we return to our model to discuss the value co-creation in the journalism course studied and the relevance of our findings to other contexts. Comparing the findings in response to RQ1 on value proposition with the findings in response to RQ2 regarding journalism students’ response, allows us to assess whether the value proposition was aligned with the students’ perceived value-in-use.

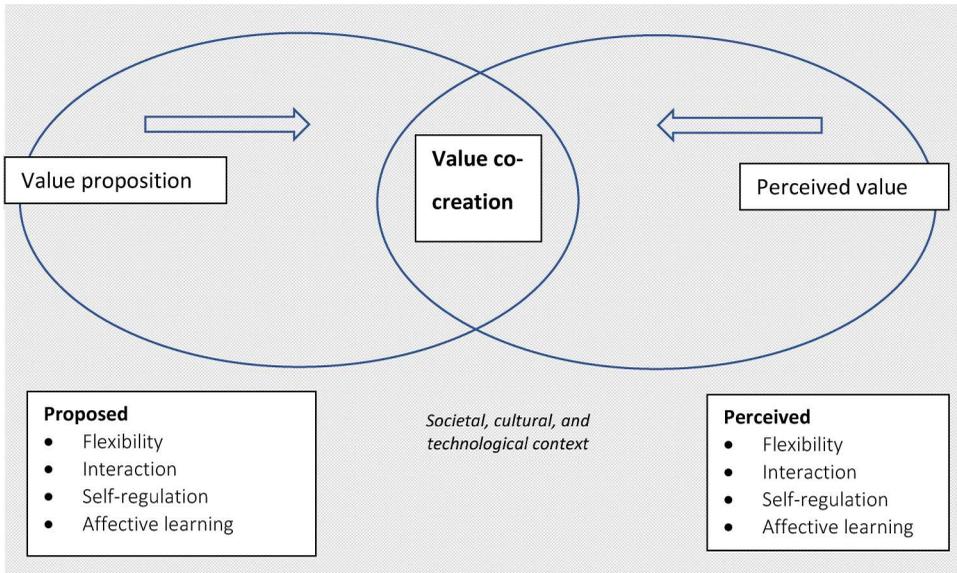
We find that Covid-19 restrictions resulted in very little flexibility in choosing online or onsite teaching. Students mostly did not have the option to choose between physical or digital teaching, one of the main benefits of blended learning regimes (Horn and Staker 2014; Owston, York, and Murtha 2013). Our study, therefore, exposes the opportunities and pitfalls of value co-creation in a learning environment, in which the use of digital learning resources and interaction are not a choice, but involuntary digitization of practical training brought about by a macro change.

Our findings confirm Boelens, De Wever, and Voet’s (2017) point about the importance of flexibility in a blended learning setting and demonstrate how difficult it was to accommodate this flexibility during the pandemic in the value proposition to students. We also, however, observed that the flexibility entailed by the digitalization of the course, such as online teaching material, which the students could access at their own convenience, was not particularly well received by these first-year journalism students. Expressions of confusion and frustration about the course structure and resources suggest that the journalism course was too complex to be easily transferred into a blended learning context, where the emphasis was increasingly on digital teaching only. This is in line with previous research, which shows that inexperienced novices, such as these first-year students, in particular, need clear rules and a strict structure to guide their performance (i.e., Benner 1984). Complex practice situations and too much new information is said to threaten learning through “cognitive overload” (Schumacher, Englander, and Carraccio 2013,

1637). We posit that, in terms of flexibility, the mismatch between the value proposition and the perceived value-in-use resulted in more insecure and demotivated journalism students. The students did not fully engage with the digital learning resources as what Lusch and Vargo (2014) describe as resource integrators. Value co-creation was, in other words, negatively affected. Although the corona crisis context may have amplified students' feeling of being overburdened and "lost", these findings demonstrate the importance of adapting flexibility to students' learning skills when digitalizing education.

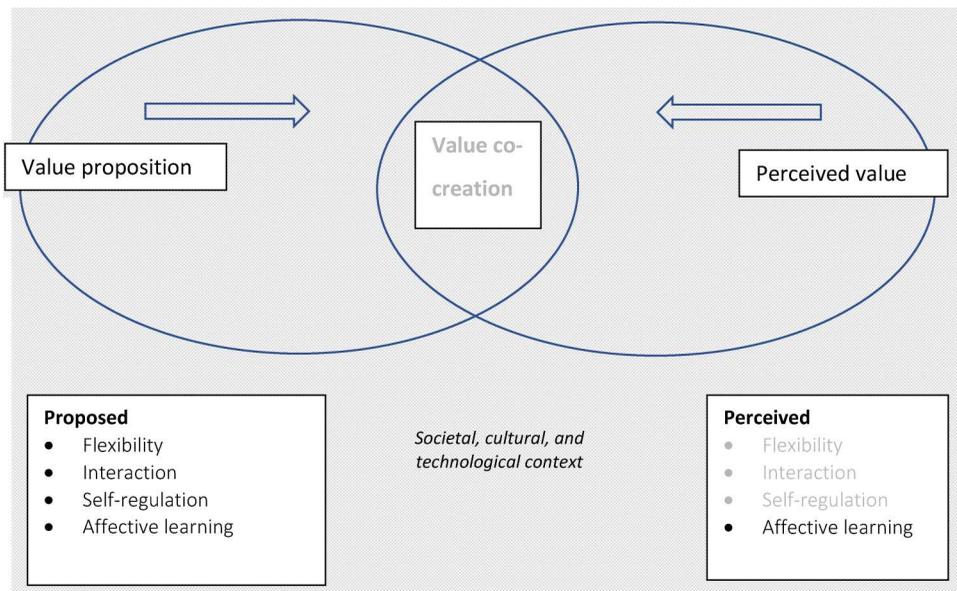
We observe that the opportunities for digital interaction built into the value proposition were experienced as insufficient to meet student assistance and support needs amid the corona crisis. The journalism teachers making themselves available on Zoom, phone and e-mail was not perceived to be a satisfactory substitute for meeting face-to-face. The threshold for seeking assistance suggests that the transactional distance in digital communication (Boelens, De Wever, and Voet 2017) in a practical journalism course such as this could be particularly challenging for student learning. The students encountered obstacles throughout the news work process, from research to publishing their finished stories online, which they would have liked to discuss and solve with their teacher in a physical space. Not being able to do so was seen to negatively affect learning. This finding echoes practical skill acquisition research, which emphasizes that the more challenging the tasks are and the more unskilled the students, the greater the requirement for mentoring through step-by-step coaching and for frequent feedback through dialogue (Schumacher, Englander, and Carraccio 2013). Most students also need to feel safe and included if they are to ask for help when they are unsure (Schumacher, Englander, and Carraccio 2013). The fact that the threshold for seeking help and assistance was raised by the lack of face-to-face on-campus interaction has implications for digital teaching beyond the corona-specific context of our study. We, based on these experiences, maintain that building digital meeting points with a very low threshold for interaction between journalism students and teachers is critical to successful online teaching in a practical journalism course. However, such digital interaction should supplement rather than a substitute on-campus training with an instructor. In regards to more theoretical-oriented courses, where the knowledge to be acquired is less complex, digital teaching might have fewer disadvantages. Also, students of theoretical courses do, however, need to feel safe in order to ask for help. Hence, finding ways of ensuring a safe learning environment is vital for both theoretical- and practical oriented courses.

We found that the wider social implications of the pandemic encouraged new pedagogic practices in affective learning and self-regulation. These findings supplement previous observations of Fowler-Watt et al. (2020) and Auerbach and Hall (2020). We found that the value propositions' emphasis on monitoring, adjusting and following up student well-being was well received. The simple act of calling all the students, asking them how they were doing and listening to their experiences and reflections in the pandemic lockdown appears to have struck a chord with the journalism students. This ad hoc addition to the value proposition was well aligned with student needs. The telephone call was a form of personal contact that signaled that each student was "seen" by the teacher and that the journalism educator cared about the well-being of their students. This value proposition element can be further developed post corona to improve the learning experiences of each individual journalism student (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The co-creation model for blended learning journalism courses.

The value co-creation of the course was, in summary, not optimal, the proposed value of flexibility, interaction and self-regulation not being fully calibrated to the learning capabilities of the students. The students’ lack of experience, the challenging tasks of the course and the general uncertainty associated with the pandemic resulted in a mismatch between the proposed value and the students’ needs (see [Figure 2](#)). The perceived value



**Figure 2.** Mismatch between value proposition and perceived flexibility, interaction and self-regulation, resulting in reduced value co-creation (marked in grey text).

of the fourth key aspect, affective learning, was, however, high. Small acts of compassion, such as the one-to-one telephone calls, seemed to ease the students' stress and increase their involvement in and commitment to the course. The value co-creation of the course was, in other words, improved by adapting the affective learning dimension of the value proposition.

An evaluation of the new, conceptual value co-creation model indicates that the four key aspects (flexibility, interaction, self-regulation and affective learning) are not equally important in value co-creation. Affective learning conditions must, as in a kind of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, be satisfactory if students are to be able to appreciate flexibility and to self-regulate. More experienced students and students on less practice-oriented courses would probably be less dependent on satisfactory affective learning conditions. The weighting of the key aspects of the value co-creation model (and the theories that inspire it), should therefore be adapted further to the type of course and the student group. A precise analysis is, furthermore, made challenging by the key aspects encompassing a wide and non-mutually exclusive group of categories. Making a certain amount of room available for interpretation is, however, important, as value co-creation is a complex phenomenon in which factors influence each other. The model, therefore, represents more of an interpretive framework that is adjustable to various classroom realities than an attempt to describe one reality. Since our case study is based on an extreme situation in journalism teaching, we welcome future research that applies the model in a more normal blended learning setting.

The two distinct contributions of this study, the value co-creation model and the results of the Covid-19 case study, are relevant to journalism schools, their educators, journalism education researchers and the practice field. Educators and researchers can use the model to unpack the value co-creation process that takes place between journalism students and teachers. The model, through focusing on students as active contributors to the learning experience, innovation, and teaching-improvement, represents a new perspective on the study of journalism education and a distinct alternative to a marketized view of students as just education customers. As journalism education is being increasingly incorporated into the marketized discourse of higher education, we posit that the value co-creation model provides an important corrective to simplistic student satisfaction measurement as indicators of teaching quality.

It is likely that the increasing opportunities for digital learning brought about by advances in online communication and cooperation technology will lead to the digital element playing a more central part in journalism training in the future. This study can therefore be of use to the increasing number of journalism educators who are converting traditional pedagogical newsrooms into blended learning programs. Especially two inter-related findings have transfer value to a post-pandemic context. First, as the case study has shown, transferring a practical on-campus course into a blended learning course without customizing and simplifying it easily leads to information overload and frustrated and confused students. Second, knowledge of the limitations and opportunities of digital resources is vital. Especially creating a safe learning environment, facilitating students' opportunity to learn by doing, building commitment and detecting struggling students seem to be challenging when face-to-face interaction is scarce. If on-campus teaching is not an opportunity, alternative approaches, such as calling students to ask how they are doing, might heighten learning conditions – also in non-pandemic contexts. Formal

training in blended learning pedagogy among J school instructors would increase knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of digital resources and likely result in better-designed courses.

Findings from this study can also be of importance in the practice field of journalism. Remote working practices during the Covid-19 pandemic quickly became an everyday routine of stimulating reporters to work together on digital platforms across temporal and spatial divides. These practices are likely to remain post corona ([reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk](http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk)). Identifying the best ways of teaching new, digital cooperation skills to students can help develop the competences required by the newsroom of the future.

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