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Commentary

Teaching media convergence and its challenges



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Many of my colleagues from journalism schools in the United States have for many years been bulking up on convergent media courses to prepare the next generation of reporters for an industry that is being reshaped by digital communication technologies. Concepts and theories of internet journalism were first taught during the days of HTML programming in the early 1990s. Some have embraced the need to teach ‘new media’ skills wholeheartedly, some gingerly, and some not at all. What are the plausible reasons behind these mixed sentiments towards the teaching of convergent media courses? Are academics’ multimedia skills keeping pace with their students who are commonly referred to as ‘digital natives’? Is the emphasis on technology-oriented production courses overlooking the imperative of teaching students the fundamentals of clear, succinct reporting?

Indeed, reporters today are required to be fluent in the language of cross-platform delivery of news and media content. In addition to the fundamental skills of journalism — master writing, efficient and effective fact gathering, interviewing and editing — these days students must also know how to blog, podcast and design websites, shoot and edit digital video, use Twitter, and finally put all text, graphics, audio and video online for cross-platform delivery. At its core, convergence essentially means the cooperation among print, broadcast and web journalists to originate the best possible story utilising the most popular delivery systems to reach the widest possible of all target audiences. Universities all over the world have evidently scrambled to remain relevant in this technology dominant media environment.

However, some major issues arise when considering the best way to maintain preeminence with respect to fostering the journalism major and ultimately preparing students for gainful employment in the newsroom. With the current emphasis on technology and multimedia production skills in journalism programs, are we compromising the need to educate students on media theories and expand their intellectual foundation as they apply to reporters’ professional development? In order to get and sustain positions in the media industry, students must also learn the strengths of each medium for telling a story, and that the interaction of media across several platforms can have a greater impact than any single medium. How is this possible

given the following challenges that educators generally face when it comes to teaching about media convergence:

1. Lack of institutional commitment, skills and resources

Faculty committed to keeping their majors responsive to technological changes in communication and commerce may need to continually reform their course offerings. The commitment to a converged media laboratory comes with a commitment to hiring new instructors and professors to not only teach lower level skills classes, but the upper level theory courses as well. But, with the economic downturn, the trend towards faculty hiring is to maintain current offerings while subsisting with a smaller faculty.

Another challenge is the financial constraint that faculty staff face when attempting to upgrade the multimedia teaching laboratories. The upgrade of aging and analog equipment, adherence to modern digital environments and maintaining the laboratories once adopted are serious impediments to convergent media instruction. Technology, while efficient and capable, is not inexpensive. Using stripped-down versions of robust programs and templates save money in the long run but curtail student capabilities and place limits on key design choices. Broadcast editing was particularly difficult to integrate into the digital convergence lab environment because of its large technological requirements of massive memory allocation, digital file transfer capabilities and software costs.

New digital equipment is often less expensive than their older analog counterparts in the industry. New cameras need less light, have higher resolution and cost less than those just five years older. Digital memory has supplanted tape-based technology with many moving parts, which were quite susceptible to wear and tear. File transfer protocols have taken the place of massive videotape libraries, offering convenience and instant access. However, a substantial outlay is still necessary to upgrade an existing lab or construct a new facility.

Updates to existing facilities require a lot of money to capitalise. For example, Auburn University at Montgomery lacks funding to equip its laboratories to implement a revised convergent curriculum. However, the department was fortunate to secure US\$100,000 of equipment donated by Raycom Media to refurbish its lab. In order to remain viable for the future, often new facilities are needed, and existing facilities require a major overhaul. Commitment to such purchases does not come readily to those without experience in the industry. Many times an outlay of such money often doesn't appear worth it to uninitiated decision makers.

2. Fear and resistance to change

Some veteran journalism instructors and even students can become 'threatened' by the study and practice of cross-platform journalism. They often fear that trying to teach in this environment or learn about it in this way will dilute the very foundation of good writing, reporting, and ethics. Additionally, fears appear about whether they can achieve real success in any one medium. Educators tend to feel that they fail to provide the depth needed to succeed in any one medium.

Many universities have faculty who often are uncomfortable teaching out of their areas of expertise. Many new courses that deal with media convergence in reporting and editing are commonly new to teaching faculty. As we know it now from the new world of practice and industry demand, students need to be equipped with the skills of reporting across media platforms. And journalism educators, likewise, should learn how to write and produce across platforms and practise what we preach (Castaeda, 2003). The counter reality is journalism instructors with a compartmentalized view of a specific medium tend to pass on to students a compartmentalized base of knowledge. Educators should learn how to write and produce across platforms and 'walk the walk'. After decades of myopic view of specific media delivery platforms, this remains one of the critical challenges we face.

3. Changing curricula to reflect the industry demand

A converged media curriculum must be refined and re-examined as new technologies and methods emerge. Those currently in the profession often unwittingly transfer their professional biases to students. Therefore, universities will often have to seek out those who are truly converted or better yet, native to the new environments, which will reflect those in which future reporters will be working. Bridges across the platforms must be forged and nurtured.

It is a fact that fundamental traditional skills of journalism – writing, editing, fact checking, objectivity and maintaining ethical standards – are still essential and necessary elements of convergence. It is only that we need to add technological skills to the curriculum to offer multimedia skills to students. Is it possible to incorporate additional courses or credit hours to the set curriculum of journalism schools?

Many accredited undergraduate journalism schools cannot require students to take more than the required number of credit hours in other courses in order to enhance their multimedia journalism skills. However, there are journalism schools that offer multimedia curriculum in innovative ways. For example at Annenberg, a new convergence core curriculum was launched a couple of years ago (Castaeda, 2003). The core subjects were spread across three semesters, beginning with news writing, then reporting, and production. Each class in the core area was team taught by three instructors. For example, students took newspaper writing on Monday; television writing on Wednesday; and online writing on Friday. And the schedule was repeated for reporting and production in subsequent semesters. The Annenberg model basically incorporated technology into traditional journalism courses.

However, veteran journalism professor, Melvin Mencher, says that technology classes are having disastrous effects on journalism schools because a glut of technology-related courses is pushing out fundamental writing subjects that are limited to 30 hours – for instance, the basics of news reporting and writing, as well as journalism history and ethics (Rogers, 2010, *About.com*).

Mencher especially mentions the recent developments at the University of Montana journalism school, which no longer requires students to take a public affairs reporting course; and the University of Colorado at Boulder which recently announced it might replace its journalism school with an interdisciplinary “information and communication technology” program. Mencher adds that “it’s now reached a point

of no return where the technology is taking over the curriculum, with disastrous effects.” He fears that “students will no longer be going to be educated in the basic function of journalism”. (Rogers, 2010, *About.com*; Grant and Jeffrey S., 2009).

In summary, students need the following skill sets to perform well in a convergent environment:

Multimedia skills: This refers to the ability to report, write and edit online, shoot and edit videos, take photographs, package and upload to a website. This means that students will graduate with multi-tasking production skills in print, video, sound and graphic design. These skills are then channeled towards producing narratives appropriate for the political communication, commercial and public media, public relations, advertising and entertainment industries.

Clear, specific and focused writing: This refers to equipping students with fundamental skills in succinct, clear writing, information gathering and research. This skill is even more urgent considering that the new generation of students is known to not read much beyond headlines. Journalism programs are now re-focusing on training students to write with clarity and purpose enhanced by new media skills.

4. Cautious embrace of state of the art

A strategic plan becomes paramount before educators begin the task of changing the curriculum and purchasing the equipment. However, curriculum change should be congruent with those values and goals of the universities enacting the changes. Educators should involve as many media professionals and academics as possible in the process and appoint key personnel to commit to such a transfer. Only then can students gain the benefit of learning in a truly converged media environment on campus.

I know of faculty staff who teach convergence as an entity in and of itself; others as concepts integrated into all media-related subjects. The main challenge for journalism schools, however, is more basic. It's a question of establishing an identity for its curriculum to keep pace with changing technologies. What should a journalism program teach its students in the digital world without diluting the fundamental principles of professional journalism as they were practised during the days of the muckrakers?

Although academic programs have long periods of gestation, nothing precludes universities from making constant adjustments in its courses and curricula. For instance at Auburn University [Montgomery] in Alabama, I don't teach my students how to use media technology, though I am cognisant of it. I teach students how to produce content using multimedia technology. I focus on the multi-perspectives that new media technology on society opens students to in their generation of stories, and how the technology will shape their work when they graduate to join the media workforce. I focus on questions such as: how will media and government and politics interface? How will that interface be affected by the online medium in which we are working with? Do officials talk one way to newspaper reporters and another to television reporters and online journalists? Does it matter if the web is the reporter's first stop on

the way back to the newsroom? Does multi-tasking now constitute basic journalism training?

The non-hierarchical newsroom layout has created new challenges for reporters and editors. Filing stories straight up to the web, and in the process skirting around the traditional gatekeepers in the old newsroom, poses an imperative of the new media paradigm, which requires positioning acute fact checkers and editorial gatekeepers at multiple sites in the newsroom. Journalism remains a collective process that involves gathering, synthesizing, checking and double-checking of stories before publishing or broadcasting.

Online interviews, too, have been gaining currency. Interviewees like having a record of the dialogue lest they are misquoted. Interviewers are wary of unseen interviewees, lest they misrepresent themselves. All these are not new concepts to teach, but concepts to teach in a new context across the communications and journalism curricula because the multimedia environment will be just as important to public relations and advertising students as it will be to those studying journalism. We must place more emphasis on educating graduates who also understand the management aspects of the multimedia newsroom.

Model of teaching media convergence

Larry Pryor, the founder of *Online Journalism Review* who also teaches at University of Southern California (USC), based on his experience found a common ground of teaching media convergence curriculum successfully at universities and colleges in the United States. In his commentary titled “*A converged curriculum: One school’s hard-won lessons*,” (<http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050224pryor/>) revealed that combining print, broadcast and online journalism into a coordinated product aimed at an audience capable of accessing all three platforms is one of the best ways to teach convergence at academic institutions without losing any basics of journalism on multiplatform.

Essence of that model is to “introduce new media into a basic core curriculum for all incoming students, including graduates, in which this topic is given equal weight with print and broadcast. Students would learn, at the outset, how to work on all platforms.” In that teaching model, classes in print, broadcast and online in writing, reporting and production are spread over three semesters in the following sequence:

	Print	Broadcast	Online
Semester 1:	Writing	Writing	Writing
Semester 2:	Reporting	Reporting	Reporting
Semester 3:	Production	Production	Production

In other words, a student would take a 2-hour print class on Monday, a similar broadcast class on Wednesday and an online class on Friday. That model implemented lesson plans that would carry over from class to class, with the same story being done in all three media.

The essence of this model requires computers, infrastructure, class space, and instructors who are capable and willing. And it calls for team teaching, tight

scheduling, customized course materials and multiple texts without compromising the basics of journalism—writing, editing, critical thinking and ethical understanding of newsgathering and presenting.

Ethics and new media

Ethical issues related to journalism education in the context of media convergence places an imperative for educators to re-evaluate their curriculum. The *Journal of Mass Media Ethics (JMME)* has explored numerous ethical issues emerging from new media technologies (Vol.16: 4, 2001). It notes that “old ethics” in journalism do not always provide ready answers to problems raised by new technology.

Deuze and Yeshua (2001) from the Amsterdam School of Communication reported on their pilot project, which sought the views of online journalists and graduate students about their experiences with ethical dilemmas specific to the internet. Their study provides an overview of the relatively limited literature on new media ethics. They focused on seven specific issues confronting the online journalist, and gauged the relative impact of the new technology on the self-perception and daily practices of online journalists in The Netherlands. Issues creating dilemmas for the Dutch journalists included commercial pressure, use of hyperlinks, problems with accuracy, use of sources, invasion of privacy, government regulations, and newsgathering methods. The pilot study concluded that while there was “no agreement whatsoever among internet journalists regarding the ethics of internet journalism,” the topic appeared prominently on the professional agenda.

Blom and Davenport (2010) in their survey of program directors of journalism programs in the US revealed that there was no clear consensus among them about which courses should be labeled as core in a hypothetical journalism undergraduate curriculum. All respondents had a unique view on classes that should be included in an undergraduate program. Twenty-one courses were picked by more than ten percent of the respondents. The seven most selected options were media ethics and law (58%), reporting—newsgathering and storytelling (55%), multimedia and storytelling (47%), reporting—newsgathering (40%), visual communication (36%), and feature writing (34%). This study indicates that courses such as mass communication research, critical thinking, journalism history, mass media and social groups, web publishing, and sociology of news, are less valued by journalism directors as an asset for all journalism students. The study further reported that the writing and reporting skills classes dominate the top seven. A comparable observation reflected that more than half of the respondents preferred the individual and combined media law and/or ethics courses version as one of the seven.

Jerry Ceppos, recently retired as vice president/news for Knight Ridder, has been involved in journalism education as a member of the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications since 1990. In his recent interview with Poynter Institute, he describes a convergence curriculum like this:

“And I worry about the downside of ‘convergence’. If that word means teaching the basics to all students -- because students filing for every medium need to know them -- that’s just fine. If it means emphasizing the importance of filing some stories instantly, that’s also appropriate. If it means teaching the

finest points of the internet, forget it. We can teach those fine points after students come to work.” (Favre, 2006, Mar. 26,).

In the same interview Ceppos said he had admired the curriculum at the Department of Journalism at Washing and Lee University in Virginia. That was because much of its program was built around journalism ethics, which reminds us of its imperative in a convergence curriculum.

Conclusion

‘Convergence’ is not what it was, or what people thought it was, only a few years ago. We don’t even much like the name. Think, instead, multimedia, cross-media, transmedia and new media. We call it whatever we want to call it. ‘Adaptive media’ is a term worth considering. We have adapted the media to our purposes and adapted to the opportunities and strengths of the new media as they have become available to us. The ‘old’ media are not going away. Not even newspapers, though the hand wringing over declining circulation has endured for decades.

The likelihood is that journalists will evolve a set of roles for the multimedia environment based on their unique and often multiple skill sets. Businesses will find another set of roles, prospering or failing depending on their adaptability to fickle markets and demanding stockholders. Ownership will move in its own direction, merging, converging, diverging. Consumers will have more choices, theoretically more input –voluntary or involuntary – through “cookie” chains. Perhaps, in this wave of mass manipulation, the consumers will have the most significant impact if they opt out en masse.

What about the teaching of media convergence? Journalism schools should adopt definitions of convergence carefully. It is not a good idea to treat journalism curriculum changes as a zero-sum game. It is possible to incorporate new media and computer assisted reporting topics into courses without sacrificing the basics of good writing, critical thinking and ethics. Technology won’t stop. Audiences have been unchained, and we have to deal with that or risk being irrelevant. Journalism educators have a great opportunity to do a better job for students and the public just by incorporating new media skills into the basic courses of journalism.

A converged curriculum is a complex and harder discipline, more demanding for students, faculty and staff. Given this ever-changing mediated environment, journalism educators need to keep pace yet focused on teaching the fundamentals of good journalism. The message is not to be taken over by the hype of new technology but to use it as a tool to improve their teaching, training and educating of journalism students.

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