

Introducing *Convergence Studies* in Journalism Curricula

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ABSTRACT

The current age is of transformation. Technology and knowledge have coalesced up so as to go hand in hand, supplementing each other. Likewise, in media and journalism sphere, convergence is a new destination. It is simply 'What's Next?' for media in many parts of the world, though the effect and influence will vary from region to region and country to country. This paper attempts to delineate the pathway for inclusion of convergence curriculum in the journalism schools because of its importance and inevitability. In today's time, students in a journalism school need to learn multi skills to work in the digital world we all live in. The key to survival is to revisit, reinvent and revise what and how we teach in these institutions. There have been significant changes in past two decades and the development is unprecedented. This has brought about changes in the workplace and Journalism profession too. The paper also provides an insight into some of the studies conducted on the theme and provides some recommendations.

Keywords: *Convergence, New Media, Journalism, ICT, Digitization.*

Introduction

Past two decades have seen tremendous fundamental changes in every sphere of media. For instance, the news output of many broadcasters has expanded rapidly since the early 1990s, and covers a wide range of media platforms from television and radio to tele-text, web and mobile phones. Subsequently, broadcasters have undergone changes in the organization and practices of production. This is perhaps most evident with regard to production for multiple platforms in an integrated media organization. To various degrees production for television and radio has been integrated with production for digital media. Radio and television used to exist in separate worlds, are now working together, and their reporters co-operate across media boundaries. The number of reporters who are able to work for both television and radio is increasing. The platforms of radio and television have been converging in terms of production processes, and later web and other platforms such as mobile phones have been added.

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The basis of this development is digitization of production systems, which enables content to travel across media boundaries. Television footage and radio sound bites can be published on the Web, and television sound is frequently used on radio. This development is often described using the all-encompassing term 'convergence', which covers a wide range of technological, social and cultural processes. Media researchers often describe convergence as a 'melting together' of information systems, telecommunications and media technologies, on one hand, and social and cultural convergence, on the other. While the concept of convergence has been central in discussions of digital media developments, it is important to understand how convergence got into the media discourse and how clearly can we understand the term based on various theories and models provided by various scholars, researchers and media scientists.

Henry Jenkins (2001) noted, that Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983) was perhaps the first to recognize convergence as a '*force of change*' in the media industries, in what he describes as the "convergence of modes."

The model of mixed-media journalism for others it represents a change in organizational structure. More than 20 years ago, Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983) offered an early conceptualization of media convergence as a process 'blurring the lines between media.' In his view, the traditional divisions between media industries, such as the press, broadcasting, and telephone networks, were slowly collapsing due to the growing use and influence of digital electronics. Therefore, the term 'technical convergence' has come to signify the 'coming together of all forms of mediated communications in an electronic, digital form, driven by computers' (Pavlik, 1996).

Grant (2009) gives a survey of many definitions currently in use. Out of these definitions one can surmise that convergence is an inter-textual form of content delivery using digital transmission methods. This definition mentions content delivery over communication because of its emphasis on the mass media.

Criado and Kraeplin (2009) have provided a very functional definition. They define convergence journalism as, 'print, broadcast, and online news staffs forging partnerships in which journalists work and distribute content across several news platforms'. Convergence journalism is providing news and information in more than one format, using the strengths of each format to best serve news audiences. It aims to respond to the fragmentation of the news audience while acknowledging the economic reality of consolidation of media ownership.

The new age journalism demands the skills, multimedia knowledge and know how, and is equally imperative for media schools, institutions to accommodate the same. This would make the workforce, which comes out of the academia, very apt for the industry.

If we talk of media, the important factor is content but it depends on the knowledge and amount of updating the content that can make it more effective. Fred Hilmer (Fairfax CEO) pointed out that to produce this type of content 'you have to have

good people'. That was the reason he had established a large training and development department within Fairfax. Human beings created the unique content needed to obtain competitive advantage in the media world. 'Put crudely, 45 per cent of our costs are people, and 100 per cent of our output is created by people. We have printing presses, but they do not create the content.' Education and training are vital to improve content (Hilmer 2004).

Edgar Huang Study

Professor Edgar Huang in United States, and a group of his graduate students conducted a national survey of universities and media (daily newspapers and commercial television stations) to ask how journalism schools should prepare students for media convergence. The study measured the level of general support for convergence education among journalism professors, editors and news professionals, to determine if a new model of journalism education was needed.

'The goal of the study is to provide evidence that will help journalism educators make informed decisions about how to respond to media convergence in their curricula and courses.' (Huang 2004)

Huang's team received 223 responses from professors (a 44 per cent response rate), 151 responses from editors (29 per cent) and 142 from news professionals (35 per cent). Almost half of the news professionals surveyed (48 per cent) said they routinely produced news content for multiple-media platforms. The majority of the respondents (84 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that journalism students should learn how to write for multiple-media platforms, and three in four respondents (78 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that all journalism majors should learn multiple sets of skills such as writing, editing, television production, digital photography, newspaper design, and web publishing. Almost two thirds of respondents (63 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that journalism students should still have a specialization, such as writing, photojournalism, broadcasting, and new media.

Huang and his team asked editors and news professionals what skills students needed to learn. Good writing topped both groups' list, with multi-media production second. The Huang survey showed that more than half of the journalism schools in the United States (60 per cent) had adapted their curricula or developed new courses to prepare for convergence. (Huang, 2004)

Criado & Kraeplin Study

Camille Kraeplin and Carrie Anna Criado of Southern Methodist University found that 85 per cent of the 240 university programs they surveyed had adopted or were in the process of introducing convergence to the curriculum. But these changes have been 'fairly minor' (Kraeplin and Criado 2002).

Huang's team concluded that more convergence in the curriculum was 'an urgent necessity'. Over time a wait-and-see strategy would disadvantage journalism schools.

They suggested that schools needed to provide cross-media knowledge and experience to help students find cross-media jobs in the future.

Multi-dimensional news reporting over multiple platforms would be the way tomorrow's news was presented, the team concluded.

'Therefore, dealing with media convergence in college journalism education is an urgent necessity. The wait-and-see strategy will place a J-school in a disadvantaged position over the long run.... Media convergence poses both challenge and opportunity to J-schools for them to reconsider their current curriculum design, sequence setting, faculty composition, teaching methods, and internship approaches.'

The writing as priority in the journalism schools must be made compulsory as and followed by the multi-media production skills as inference from the study.

In today's time the Newspapers publish video content on the web. When it all started, there was a sense that all staff shouldn't be trained for this medium. But now there has been a shift in favour of training every reporter for these multitude formats available.

As a result, what we see now is that there is a compact change in the newspaper organizations, the way work is done; photographers are assigned to work on videos and writer to update stories on the web.

Dupagne & Garrison Study

Dupagne and Garrison (2009) offer insights after conducting their qualitative study of a converged newsroom in Tampa Florida:

'The challenge for faculty and school administrators will be to decide how to adapt their curricula to the new convergence expectations while taking into account the fluctuating economics of higher education. Given the continuous importance of journalism education fundamentals, which was confirmed in this study, adjusting existing curricula rather than designing new ones could be the preferred route of many administrators' (p. 198).

Media convergence has changed dramatically the way newspapers approach journalism. Newspapers have the provision now of publishing on many different formats. These formats require different skills in different areas. The areas most commonly seen are videography, writing and web design.

Industry demands recommend that students have converged skills in all areas. They are structuring themselves in a way that makes them able to publish on all formats without everyone doing the same job

Recommendations

Convergence has certainly changed the way in which media is operating. The boundaries of media platforms are intersecting and mostly formless. Digitization and technological convergence have made content sharing easy and journalists today share the content to be used for media like television, radio and web.

Media organizations are increasingly integrating production process and a lot of cooperation can be witnessed between different desks.

There is no denying now as far as the cross media cooperation is concerned. Besides digital media is on rise and is mandatory to accommodate to. Mobile platforms have become an important choice for journalism practioners and accessibility to media is ever indispensable.

Since the transformation has already set in, there is a need to understand this changing environment, its dynamism and the complexity. There is certainly a need to comprehend the digital initiatives, which will pave way for us to access, adapt and use the concept for better development and progress.

The recommendations can be put in two sub categories:

- A) Classroom Situation and
- B) Newsroom Setting

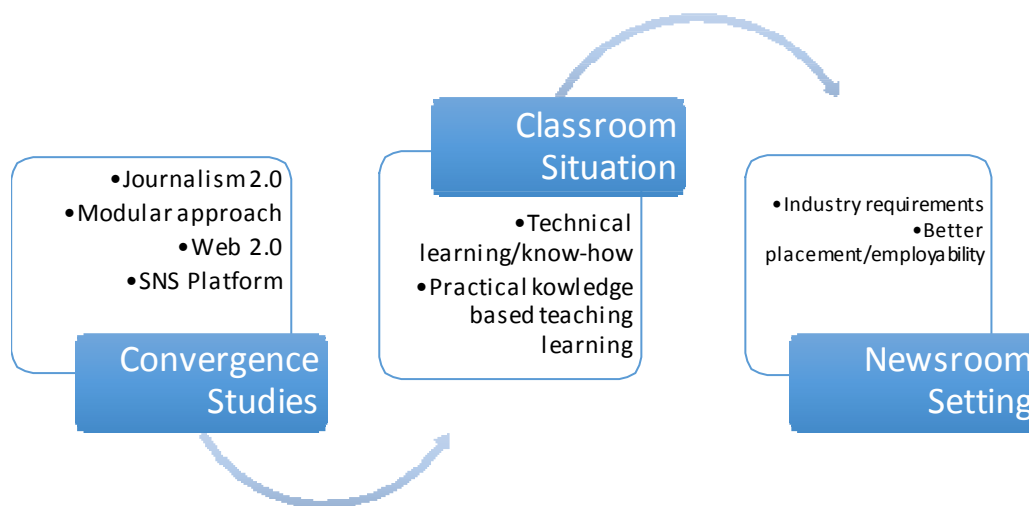


Figure 1: Convergence Classroom/Newsroom Simulated Transition

In the basic perception of it, all academic programmes are designed in a manner to pursue and promote excellence, innovation and creativity. Now the shift or a change from traditional lecturing method to new ICT, smart-class enabled pedagogy has resulted in substantial gains in learning, divergent thinking. This also helps in creating concept linkage with community and society. The curriculum design therefore has to have an equitable proportion of hands-on practical training for skill acquisition and sound theoretical knowledge, which essentially serves to equip the students to face real-time challenges and societal needs. The curriculum

should attempt to tackle the needs of various stakeholders such as industries, print and electronic media as well as ancillary organizations like online media and others.

Such a program would obviously put students in charge of the change, which has taken over the field of journalism. This is also going to help in creating new delivery structures for skills-based learning. Further in case of a Classroom situation, the inclusion of convergence into the journalism curricula and to make it compulsory for the journalism schools to incorporate the teaching/learning of technical components like digital media, web, blogs, putting audio, video and text on websites etc to students would definitely help to be editors, writers, photographers and reporters of tomorrow in the industry.

In a journalism school, every student must have the opportunity to work with every way of gathering, processing, packaging and publishing the content or information. This way of publishing information can be seen as, doing audio/video, photography and web design.

It is very vital that in Journalism schools, teachers now teach their students cross-platform skills, prepare them to work in emerging fields, give them confidence in their skills and make them employable, teach them to write news for different audiences for different media, equip them with skills of making videos, films, create podcasts and related stuff for every possible media platform and therefore identify the best opportunities in today's digital world.

Journalism curricula have been on a revamp mode since long now. There was a time when in broadcast journalism; a specialist faculty would be hired for doing practical work for instance black and white photography with a darkroom facility. Now the time is over for that. In digital lab we have Photoshop, replacing darkroom lab. Even the teaching-learning methods, from chalk board, marker board it is now interactive board of a smart-class, which is used as the medium.

In case of newsroom, for the journalists, convergence can essentially prove very beneficial. In fact media convergence can be a successful avenue for modern day journalism, especially to journalist who are open to technological change. As a communicator, which every journalist is, convergence makes him more marketable. Convergence offers him or her the absolute ability to access news from every medium, which is imaginable.

In case of newsrooms the culture has to be changed which can be done only with the acceptance and adaptation of technology.

'Convergence calls for coordination and cooperation rather than constant competition among print, broadcast and online media. And that cooperation means changing what might be called the culture of news. The culture of news does not change easily, however. Studies show that news organizations are among the institutions most resistant to change...Convergence invites journalists to develop new habits toward doing their jobs. But old habits die hard'

(Thornton & Keith, 2009)

A study was carried out by Susan Jacobson, on the models of multimedia journalism, which was later published in 2010. Her study, *'Emerging Models of Multimedia Journalism: A Content Analysis of Multimedia Packages'* published on nytimes.com; analyzes the production changes in newsrooms, saying, 'As newsrooms migrate more of their activities to the Web, it is likely that the shape of the news will also undergo transformation' (Jacobson, 2010).

Susan notes other changes that have come with the advent of the Internet, saying, 'changing from analog print and broadcast to the digital Web has already begun to influence how we educate young journalists, how consumers of news products interpret the news and how practitioners approach the craft of journalism' (Jacobson, 2010)

Convergence as commodity has to be sold in the classrooms and then worked out in industries. Fidler wrote the book *Mediamorphosis* in 1997. 'Mediamorphosis is a term for convergence, but Mediamorphosis is also an evolutionary process, not an end product,' he said. According to him, 'Established forms of communication media must change in response to the emergence of a new medium-their only option is to die.'

If we analyze Fidler's philosophy, we observe and face an assumption, which reinforces that journalism and mass communication programs, must develop courses and curricula not only to meet the needs of new media such as the Internet but to meet the changing needs of the existing media, industry as well.

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