

# **Building a Case for Convergence Journalism Curriculum**

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*This paper examines the growth of convergence journalism training in the academy. It suggests that currently most programs with convergence curricula have implemented what could best be described as a multidisciplinary approach, which represents a lower level of integration across media. For instance, only two in ten heads of journalism divisions said they had substantially altered their curriculum to reflect the industry trend toward convergence, and most required students to specialize in a print, broadcast, or online track. It presents an interdisciplinary model, which is at a higher level of integration, as a better alternative for teaching convergence journalism.*

## **Introduction**

B-roll, standup, NAT sound. These were some of the terms the former print journalists on our faculty would be expected to toss off with ease if our division seriously pursued a convergence curriculum. Even worse for these print mavens, however, was the thought that they would be expected to run all, or even some, of those machines in the new digital TV studio. But they weren't the only ones. At least one broadcast professor seemed less than enthusiastic at the prospect of writing something longer than a seventy-five-word script. Both parties to this convergence effort

feared being out of their natural element.

Convergence journalism has evolved as newsrooms have gone digital, blending media formats. Significant empirical evidence also suggests it has developed as barriers to cross-ownership have fallen to deregulation since passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996.<sup>1</sup> There has been much discussion over the precise meaning of convergence and a fully converged newsroom. "Convergence generally means that all component platforms available for delivery to a Web-based operating system contribute to the overall information product. It also implies that information sharing

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and enhancement takes place along the way."<sup>2</sup> Andrew Nachison of The American Press Institute's Media Center has defined convergence as "the strategic, operational, product and cultural union of print, audio, video and interactive digital informational services and organizations."<sup>3</sup> Lawson-Borders emphasizes that most convergence definitions are consistent in their discussion of "blending technological capabilities to deliver content on multiple platforms through computer driven distribution systems."<sup>4</sup>

University journalism departments are also adapting to shifts in the industry and changing their curricula to reflect an emphasis on convergence. Many of us teaching journalism find this presents challenges. A truly converged curriculum requires the blending of two very different cultures and approaches—print and broadcast. Add the Internet to the mix and one has a stew of different terms, writing formulas, technologies, visual needs, conceptual approaches, etc. This paper examines the growth of convergence journalism training in the academy. It suggests that currently most programs with convergence curricula have implemented what could best be described as a multidisciplinary approach. And it presents interdisciplinary education as a better alternative for teaching convergence journalism.

### ***Interdisciplinary Theory***

The pedagogical benefits of reaching across disciplinary boundaries have long been recognized within the academy. Educators with expertise in this field have written much about when and how these efforts should be pursued. For instance,

scholars make a clear distinction between a multidisciplinary and an interdisciplinary collaboration. The chief component that distinguishes between the two curriculums is extent of integration, or assimilation, among the different disciplines. Thus, according to Stember, a multidisciplinary approach, which is at a lower level of integration, might involve several disciplines that each provides a different perspective on a problem or issue. She suggests as an example faculty members from history, literature, and sociology who all teach in a women's or an ethnic or area studies program. In contrast, the goal of an interdisciplinary curriculum, writes Stember, should be to integrate interdependent parts of knowledge into "harmonious relationships":

A genuinely interdisciplinary enterprise is one that requires more or less integration and even modification of the disciplinary contributions while the inquiry or teaching is proceeding. In interdisciplinary efforts, participants must have an eye toward the holistic complex of interrelationships and take into account the contributions of others in making their own contributions.<sup>5</sup>

Klein describes an interdisciplinary model of general education as based on two levels.<sup>6</sup> The first level focuses on clarifying salient concepts and the skills to be used in evaluating those concepts. The second level focuses on resolving, or integrating, the different perspectives and concepts identified in level one. She says this

is in many ways a dialectical process since interdisciplinarity is achieved when disciplinary differences are clarified and resolved with the goal of producing a synthesis.

Most scholars agree that the presence of integration or synthesis means an interdisciplinary curriculum focuses on a process.<sup>7</sup> The steps in Newell's version of this process are abstracted from issues of teamwork and include such steps as defining the problem, question or issue; determining which disciplines or schools of thought are relevant; and developing a working command of the relevant concepts and theories.<sup>8</sup> In the case of a convergence curriculum, for true integration to take place, according to interdisciplinary theory, the different media involved must contribute to a process that yields a truly integrated product. For instance, to use a simple example, streaming audio and video must appear alongside in-depth print-style stories and Web links, combined together into integrated digital Web-based news content. A journalism curriculum that provided students with the conceptual, analytical, and practical skills to achieve this would be on its way toward achieving interdisciplinarity.

### ***Convergence Journalism and Complexity Theory***

It could be argued that young journalists entering a convergence environment today are encountering a complex system. Increasingly the demands of a converged media system ensure that young journalists' careers will be less stable and predictable than in the past. Whereas a decade ago a typical jour-

nalist followed a path that never included forays into other media, today he or she may be asked to cross disciplinary lines:

*The Tampa (Fla.) Tribune* doesn't circulate in Sarasota, about thirty miles to the south, but its affiliated television station, WFLA, has a bureau there. So, when a spectacular murder in Sarasota led to a trial in Texas, a WFLA reporter was dispatched to San Antonio. She sent back not only daily television reports but stories for the *Tribune*. She also contributed bits of courtroom observation for TBO.com, the online partner of the *Tribune* and WFLA.<sup>9</sup>

But as Lawson-Borders notes, convergence should be strategic and should take place when the content and delivery system work together. "Media managers must be judicious in the choice of content for use across platforms."<sup>10</sup> The same is true of the converged classroom. The student will be asked to master different disciplines, and if the story or project calls for a converged approach, he or she will be expected to make that judgment and then deliver on multiple platforms, and to integrate those media within a converged digital platform. In either case, a convergence environment might correctly be called complex.

Newell writes that interdisciplinarity offers the best, and perhaps only, way to adequately address complexity. According to complexity theory, the phenomena modeled by most complex systems are multifaceted, that is they appear to be different

**Table 1**  
**HOW IMPORTANT CONVERGENCE SKILLS ARE TO MEDIA MANAGERS WHEN HIRING\***

	TV Managers (N=42)	Newspaper Managers (N=64)	Journalism Educators (N=46)
Very Important	23.5%	16.2%	31.1%
Moderately Important	49.0	52.9	62.2
Not at All Important	27.5	30.9	6.7

\*TV and newspaper respondents were asked how important these skills would be to them; educators were asked how important they believed these skills would be to media managers when hiring. Includes those who are and are not involved in convergence projects.

from various angles because viewers see facets where different components and relationships dominate.<sup>11</sup> As such, the different disciplines available through an interdisciplinary curriculum could provide insight into these various facets as well as into the entire complex system. According to Newell, the linkages between facets in a complex system are always predominantly nonlinear (with squared terms or even higher powers). In contrast, if there is any coherence within a discipline, then the variables on which it focuses would most likely be more linearly related to each other than to the variables studied by other disciplines.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The State of the Convergence Curricula***

The findings presented here are from a national survey that examined the state of convergence journalism in industry (daily newspapers and television stations) and the academy. To identify undergraduate journalism de-

partments, we turned to *U.S. News & World Report* magazine's annual rankings and included all national universities in the top four tiers, which equals roughly 240 departments (*U.S. News*, 2002). Colleges and universities with full-fledged undergraduate journalism departments were identified, and in October 2002 a 33-question survey was e-mailed to a sample of deans and division chairs of 105 undergraduate journalism programs; 46 responded.

To select the industry sample, we identified the 210 largest U.S. media markets, based on rankings provided by Nielsen Media Research (Nielsen, 2002). We randomly chose one TV station from each market. We then selected the largest daily newspaper, based on circulation, from the same 210 markets (there was only one newspaper in the vast majority of markets). An 18-question survey was e-mailed in October 2002 to the sample of newspaper editors and TV news directors. Some 42 TV executives and 64 newspaper executives responded.<sup>13</sup>

Among the university journalism programs included in the sample, 38% were programs that were not part of a larger school or college of communication, 41% were part of a school or college of communication, and 21% represented a school of journalism. Of those programs, around 19% had fewer than 100 majors, 37% had at least 100 but fewer than 500 majors, 28% had at least 500 but fewer than 1,000 majors, and 16% had 1,000 majors or more.

Overall, our survey showed that universities anticipate industry interest in new hires with a range of convergence skills (in fact, educators in the survey somewhat overestimated this interest). First, as Table 1 shows, our study showed that both newspaper and television managers believe it is important for young journalists to be trained in convergence skills—for instance, to be able to write stories for more than one medium. Nearly three-quarters of television news directors or station managers said this was moderately or very important. Nearly 70% of newspaper managing editors said this was moderately or very important. Generally, this versatility was more critical for TV than for newspaper hires, with more on the TV side saying convergence skills were “very important” among new hires. In comparison, journalism educators estimated that 31% of media managers would say convergence skills were very important, while 62% said these skills would be moderately important when hiring.

Likewise, as Table 2 shows, both journalists and journalism educators believe specific convergence skills are valuable. For instance, nearly 100% of both television and newspaper managers as well as university journalism chairs said that Internet researching

skills were important for journalists, right behind writing and reporting skills and news judgment. Around 8 in 10 broadcast managers and university chairs said it was important for journalists to be able to write across media; 6 in 10 newspaper journalists viewed this skill as important. And just under a third of media managers said journalists should know Web language and design, compared with just under two-thirds of journalism department chairs who said this was valuable.

The journalism educators interviewed believe convergence skills are important for their students, and not surprisingly, they had acted on that belief. Nearly 9 in 10 (85%) of the university programs included in the survey—both large and small, with many majors or few—had adapted their curriculum, or begun to adapt it, in response to the industry trend toward convergence. However, most of these changes were fairly minor. Some 77% of the university respondents with convergence curricula said the changes represented a minor shift, that their curriculum had been altered some to accommodate the industry emphasis on convergence. Nearly another quarter (23%) said the changes they had made represented a major shift, that their curriculum had been completely revamped to reflect the industry emphasis on convergence.

Slightly more than half of respondents (51%) described their programs as ones in which print, broadcast, and other majors remained separate tracks of study, with no overlap. Nearly as many (46%) described a somewhat more converged model, saying that all journalism majors in their programs were required to take classes in a range of media—such as writing for print,

**Table 2**  
**PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE THAT EACH OF THE FOLLOWING**  
**CONVERGENCE SKILLS IS IMPORTANT**

	TV Managers (N=42)	Newspaper Managers (N=64)	Journalism Educators (N=46)
Writing/Reporting Skills	100%	98.6%	100%
News Judgment	100	98.6	100
Knowledge of Media Law & Ethics	98.0	92.8	97.7
Broad Liberal Arts Background	92.2	92.8	95.5
Visual Literacy	97.9	89.9	81.8
Specialized Knowledge (Science,Business, etc.)	64.0	85.5	84.1
Understanding of Media Economics	59.2	47.8	48.8
Internet Researching Skills	96.0	98.6	97.7
The Ability to Write across Media	80.0	59.4	79.6
Web Language & Design Skills	30.6	31.9	65.9

broadcast, and online—but then specialize in one sequence. Only one respondent described his/her convergence program as “truly converged,” where students worked across platforms throughout their studies. However, most (54%) of the surveyed programs included at least one course in

their curriculum where students were expected to write for or produce content for all three primary media—print, broadcast, and the Internet. And 36% required all students to take that course. So this suggests that some capacity existed within these programs for interdisciplinarity, where there was

**Table 3**  
**IN CONVERGENCE PROGRAMS (N=39), THE PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO RECEIVE**  
**TRAINING IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS**

	All	Most	Some	Few	None
Using the Internet as a Research Tool	65.8%	28.5%	5.7%	—	—
Writing for Print Media	74.3	15.4	10.3	—	—
Writing for Online Media	15.4	30.8	33.3	20.5	—
Writing for Broadcast Media	15.4	23.1	43.6	12.8	5.10
Learning Web Language & Design Skills	5.30	16.4	34.2	34.2	7.90
On-air Presentation for TV	2.60	7.7	48.7	33.3	7.70
Learning Broadcast Technical Skills	—	7.9	36.8	42.1	13.2
On-air Presentation for Radio	2.60	5.3	34.2	36.8	21.1

the potential for true integration of media content. Within our own program, a capstone course has been envisioned as an active news environment where students would cover breaking stories. The stories would be reported for campus TV and radio. Streaming audio and video clips from these stories would then run alongside online stories on our department's Web news vehicle, which would be produced by the class, while print versions of the pieces might appear in the campus newspaper. The goal of this interdisciplinary training would be to turn out young journalists who could produce content that would make the best possible use of the relative strengths of each medium, or that would be greater than the sum of its parts. Students would be learning to create a truly new medium that was accessed and used in new ways by an audience, not one that simply used the old media in new ways.

Most of the journalism departments that have dabbled with convergence, however, don't currently prepare students for this sort of interdisciplinary work. As Table 3 shows, few of the surveyed programs appear to train students in a range of media skills. Overall, the emphasis remains on print, with 90% of convergence programs training most or all of their students to write for print media. Nearly half (46%) also train most or all of their students to write for the Internet. In contrast, just under 4 in 10 train most or all students to write content for broadcast. Far fewer programs expose a majority of students to the technical skills associated with online or broadcast media—learning Web language and design, for instance, or how to handle a camera for TV. This again brings up the question of whether most of these convergence curriculums have stopped at multidisciplinary

when an interdisciplinary model should be the goal.

As Stember writes: "Participants need to recognize that different disciplines have different cognitive maps and that learning at least part of these maps is essential for turning multidisciplinary work into interdisciplinary work."<sup>14</sup>

Stember says that unless these cognitive maps—basic concepts, modes of inquiry, ideas about what counts as a problem, etc.—are shared and understood, it may leave colleagues unable to see the relevance of one another's points of view. This may lead to communication at the "lowest common denominator." Clearly both faculty and students need to be well aware of the vocabulary, concepts, and skills associated with each of the journalistic disciplines involved in the convergence process. For instance, the writing skills needed for online and print journalism are very similar. But that's where the similarities end. Journalists must learn to think differently in the digital world and to produce a very different product. A curriculum must provide the tools to help them grasp these new cognitive maps. More important, however, they must also learn how to make these media interact.

## Conclusions

This paper suggests that an interdisciplinary approach would be a better model than a multidisciplinary approach when teaching convergence journalism. This is supported by the fact that the majority of the newspaper and TV executives in our survey believe that convergence skills are important for new hires. And evidence suggests that the goal of a convergence

curriculum, as seen through the lens of interdisciplinary theory, should be to prepare students conceptually and practically to create an integrated media product, one which combines elements of both print and broadcast within a digital environment. To facilitate this, faculty and students must share an understanding of the "cognitive maps"—or the vocabulary, concepts, and skills—associated with each of the journalistic disciplines involved in the convergence process. Convergence journalism can accurately be called complex because it requires that students learn and integrate these different skills within a single media product or project. And it calls on them to ascertain where and when convergence is appropriate—not for all situations, but for some. As Newell has noted, interdisciplinarity offers the best, and perhaps only, way to adequately address complexity. In addition, as the literature on multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary curricula suggests, students' experiences with the latter will be much richer and more fruitful. However, although universities have anticipated industry interest in convergence skills and responded by adapting their curriculums, most of these changes do not reflect an interdisciplinary model. If our students are not being taught basic print or audio or video skills or to think like online journalists, how can they function in a digital environment as convergence journalists?

Perhaps journalism students who do follow a convergence model will forge emergent forms. Perhaps they will find themselves self-identifying as reporters or word-smiths/editors or visual journalists who comfortably work across mediums. Or perhaps the tech-



nical barriers will be too great. Additional research is needed to determine what we can expect from twenty-first-century journalists. Perhaps the best we can hope for at this juncture is to cultivate versatile news reporters and writers who are rooted in the best traditions of journalism and who have a sense of how to present news and information with convergence in mind.

In order to accomplish that objective, we as educators must challenge ourselves to grasp the true creative potential of convergence. Not because it is fashionable, but because it's the way our students should be learning to prepare them for tomorrow's media environment. But we can't do that unless we all let go of some of our own entrenched fears and phobias. On some faculties, this approach may mean that the practitioners of particular disciplines should undergo training in the other forms of media production. Print media faculty should develop an understanding of the broadcast skill set and vice versa. For interdisciplinarity to exist, this cross-training must take place. But faculty shouldn't expect miracles and should be ready to discuss team-teaching or hiring adjuncts with the needed skills to meet short-term, and perhaps long-term, curriculum needs. In some cases, faculty may need to adjust their expectations in terms of how quickly or completely they can move toward convergence. Teaching students the basics in all three media, as well as ensuring they take courses that train them to be solid reporters, writers, and critical thinkers, simply fills too many required hours. Compromises may have to be made. Like our students, we are embarking on a new and complex journey. However, to achieve our goal of producing com-

petent convergent journalists we must keep our eyes on the ultimate goal of interdisciplinarity.

## Endnotes

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10. Lawson-Borders, "Integrating New Media and Old Media."

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12. Newell, "A Theory of Interdisciplinary Studies."

13. For the television sample, in particular, these numbers were lower than we would have liked. However, basing our calculations on the number of individuals in our initial population who had the opportunity to complete the survey, we obtained a 40% response rate from the newspaper sample, a 38% response rate from the television sample, and a 46% response rate from the university sample.

14. Stember, "Advancing the Social Sciences Through the Interdisciplinary Enterprise."