A Review of Research Studies on Convergence Journalism and Journalism Education in USA

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Abstract:

Journalism education is a young discipline and is torn between science, social science and humanities. It is an interdisciplinary subject that has integrated skills and theory in equal measure. The journalism education is under tremendous pressure to improvise in order to cater to the needs of new and emerging media. Over the years the path of journalism education in US has been navigated by the committees / task forces / commissions appointed to examine the challenges posed by the social, economic and technological changes. Journalism education has changed its approach and focus by responding to the challenges of the society. J-Schools in US have retooled courses according to the needs of industrial society by ‘Trade school approach’ with an industry model to cater to the demands of media. This study reviews the research initiatives evaluating the role of convergence in retooling journalism education. Most of the schools in US have initiated retooling the curriculum to integrate convergence element in education points out the studies.

Introduction:

The focus of journalism education has been invented and reinvented to strike a sense of balance between theory and practice on one hand and skill and philosophy on the other in the past hundred years since the days of
Willard G. Bleyer.

Willard G. Bleyer renowned as the architect of journalism education curriculum in American schools developed a four-year curriculum in 1906, called junior-senior curriculum, based upon publisher Joseph Pulitzer’s ideas for his planned journalism school and Harvard University President Charles W. Eliot’s concept of a liberal education. Bleyer’s formula consisting of one quarter of journalism courses and three quarter of courses in social sciences and humanities gave direction and became the guiding spirit of journalism education in the beginnings of the 20th century (AEJMC Curriculum Task Force Report, 1996).

Debate between skills versus theory refuses to find a decent burial and for sometime there was discussion about how to strike a balance between the two. The controversy-surrounding proposal by the Columbia University President Lee Bollinger to ‘overhaul’ the curriculum of the high profile graduate school of Journalism to give a strong ‘professional identity’ compelled many in the academia to reinvent the wheel. Despite the debates and reams of paper written on the issue, the journalism educators in United States and the world continue to struggle to define the direction journalism education should take (Brynildssen, Shawna 2002).

Committees / Task forces / Commissions on J-Education:

Over the years the path of journalism education in US has been navigated by the committees / task forces / commissions appointed to examine the challenges posed by the social, economic and technological changes. Oregon Report – Planning for Curricular Change in Journalism Education (1983), which was originally a project on the Future of Journalism and Mass communication Education, constituted to look into the
Curriculum at the School of Journalism, University of Oregon became the national document in the eighties presenting ‘the status and future direction of learning and the advancement of knowledge in the field of journalism and mass communication within the realities of American higher education’ (*Oregon Report, 1987*). The Report is critical of the J-Schools for the stagnation in their growth branding them as ‘little more than industry-oriented trade schools’ underlining the need for concrete measures to revitalize journalism education (Ibid).

Conventionally, the journalism courses claim to be based on liberal philosophy where the focus is on liberal arts and general education leading to overall development of a student. The Accrediting Council recognizes the emphasis on liberal arts on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication that requires ‘undergraduate students to take 75 percent of their work in the arts and sciences in humanities, social sciences and science components.’ (*Oregon Report, 1983*)

J-schools offering broadcast and print education have a liberal arts approach featuring a mix of theoretical and practical subjects. Nevertheless, the degree of liberal arts component in skilled programs has varied from program to program. In a debate on skill versus theory, it is apt to agree with Erin Kock, Jong G.Kang and David Allen who quotes Kamalipour, ‘Skills can become outdated quickly. However, theoretical knowledge or an understanding of the processes and influences – the ability to address who, what, when, where, why and how of each particular case, situation, action, or problem remains relatively constant’ (Kock, Kong, and Allen, 1999).

Over the years Journalism education has changed its approach and focus by responding to the challenges of the society. J-Schools retooled
courses according to the needs of industrial society by ‘Trade school approach’ with an industry model to cater to the demands of media. In the ‘Industry model the students are taught the entry-level skills they will need to secure their first jobs in a single, specific communication industry such as newspaper and broadcasting’ (Oregon Report, 1983).

A generic model of journalism and mass communication education opposed to the skill-centric industry-based training model was suggested in the eighties to accommodate the demands of information revolution but it raised controversy (Ibid).

Eighties also witnessed deliberations on the approach to journalism education and Mullins Report calls for a shift from industry-based skill training approach to that of functionalist approach. The Report calls for a ‘functionalist (or integrated) rather than a fragmented or segmented approach to curriculum planning and evaluation’ (AEJMC Curriculum Task Force, 1996).

Ironically, the gap between Journalism educators and professional journalists continued to widen in the eighties with most of the Reports squarely blaming the schools for not helping the industry. Improving the Education of Tomorrow's Journalists is the project of Carnegie Corporation of New York that ‘invited journalism deans from five leading research universities to consider the role of the academy in a national effort to revitalize journalism education and strengthen the capacity of the profession to fulfill its obligations to our citizenry and our democracy’ (Report, 2005).

The report regrets that ‘the schools of journalism have never achieved the stature long enjoyed by schools that prepare students for medicine, law, architecture, business and others’ (Report, 2005).
In the early eighties, the Oregon Report, which gave a blueprint for Journalism and Communication education, too was highly critical of J-Schools. It said 'the general state of journalism and mass communication education is dismal….These units (departments) rarely play a major role in the governance of the university and rarely provide persons for the top cadre of leadership' (Oregon Report, 1983). The Oregon Report ‘drove deep wedge between the concepts of general journalism education and a professionally oriented education’. (Duhe Sonya, Forte Zukowski & Lee Ann, Spring 1997).

The *Electronic Media Career preparation Study* was no exception. The Report concluded that ‘broadcast education fell far short of providing practical knowledge for the real world’ (Dickson & Brandon, 2000).

The criticism of journalism education by the media persisted in the nineties. Dickson and Brandon quotes Alridge who called on journalism schools to ‘close the reality gap that separates journalism schools from journalism itself and suggested that journalism schools might fall victim to academic Darwinism if they don’t make themselves more relevant’, sums up the antagonistic attitude of professionals towards journalism educators’ (Ibid).

In the nineties, the Curriculum Task Force constituted by AEJMC in its document entitled, *Responding to the Challenge of Change*, suggested for the development of a problem-solving approach to media education……..It said that the media education should be teaching more ‘why’ in addition to ‘how’ in professional courses. ……..The task force proposed that there is room for both practical and philosophical courses in
all media units but that even practical courses need a philosophical foundation’ (AEJMC Curriculum Task Force Report, 1996).

Nineties saw a shift in the thinking of educators who felt that journalism education should enable students with ‘multiple competencies’ to excel in information society. This can be realized if the media education ‘consider moving beyond traditional concepts of theory in courses to the philosophical concerns inherent in a liberal arts perspective and the scientific rigor inherent in mathematics and the social and physical sciences’ (Ibid).

It is also true that nineties saw disciplines of social sciences recording decline in student enrollment, where as journalism schools were flooded with aspirants knocking its door but journalism educators failed to capitalize on the situation. According to the 2005 Enrollment Report the enrollment in master’s degree programs in journalism and mass communication increased by 4.5% in 2005 and enrollments at the undergraduate level have grown every year since 1993 (Lee, Tudor and Maria). Nevertheless, few are interested in traditional journalism. David Perlmutter of Kansas admits ‘every journalism program I know of is growing. More people want to major in journalism. When we say journalism, we really mean media because fewer people are interested in traditional journalism and more and more people are interested in advertising, public relations and internet’ (David Perlmutter, 2007).

The review studies on journalism education and convergence:

The review of studies on journalism education and convergence revealed many articles but very few research studies. Media convergence as an issue caught the attention of media in mid nineties. John Seigenthaler, founder of The Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center, is given the
credit for being first to predict the new approach to journalism education in 1994. He predicted a new form of journalism education that will train the student for citizenship in a technology-saturated new information age, in which there will be a marvelous multi-faceted array of career opportunities’ (Castaneda Laura, Murphy Sheila, Hether Jane Heather, 2005).

The convergence got visibility with the media company, the Media General, establishing a model of media convergence, the mother of all convergence by bringing together WFLA- TV at Tampa enjoying large TV market, Tampa Tribune- the newspaper and the Tampa Bay Online( TBO)- the online site, under one common roof in March 2000.( Al Tompkins and Aly Colon 2000). WFLA News Director Dan Bradley’s statement that all the three media would ‘share their journalism minute-to-minute, 24hrs a day, every day’ (Ibid) heralded the arrival of new brand of journalism but posed new challenges to journalism educators. TV, print and online media were brought under one roof in Tampa-Tribune model of convergence with a first of its kind converged news facility set up at a cost of $ 40 million in 121,000 square-foot space to facilitate the new kind of media bonding (Ibid).

The findings of a national survey in 2002 reveals that more than half of the J-schools in the United States redesigned their curricula or developed new courses to cope with media convergence, but professors need to be better prepared technologically’ (Huang, Davison, Davis, Nair, Shreve and Bettendorf, 2003). The study assumes significance as its findings help us understand how many J-schools have revamped their curricula and what is the attitude of professors teaching critical thinking vs. teaching technical skills in the context of media convergence (Ibid). This study was similar to the study undertaken by David Bulla in 2002 to understand the attitudes of
media professionals and educators towards media convergence and its impact on J-education. Bulla’s study suggested that ‘journalism teachers need to redesign their programs and their curricula to take into account the changes in an industry that is now communicating across media platforms. Teaching students to tell stories for print, visual and digital platforms will gradually become a priority in journalism education (Bulla, 2002).

One of the findings of the study on the status of media convergence in the industry reveals that ‘by the end of 2002, 19 % of the newspapers and commercial television stations with news content in the United States had gone through media mergers. Roughly, half of the news professionals surveyed (48%) reported that they produced news content for multiple media platforms on a routine basis that was true both in merged media (50%) and non-merged media (48%)’. This study pointed out that irrespective of media convergence, journalists practiced multiplatform reporting (Huang, 2003). A study by Singer explored the application of the diffusion of innovation theory to newsroom convergence. One of the major findings of the study is that journalists are positive in their attitude towards convergence and felt that ‘overall, converged newsrooms are a good idea and convergence will prove to be a successful editorial strategy for the news industry as a whole’ (Singer, 2003).

‘Bridging newsrooms and classrooms: preparing the next generation of journalists for converged media (Huang, 2003), is a national survey of teachers and professionals conducted in 2002 to understand the level of support for convergence education. The study, endorses Gil Thelen’s (2002) opinion that journalism students should learn how to write for multiple media platforms. ‘Journalism majors should learn multiple sets of skills,
such as writing, editing, TV production, digital photography, newspaper design and web publishing’ (Ibid). Research shows that Journalism educators agree that the students should both learn technical skills as well as critical thinking skills (Ibid). Nevertheless, editors tend to prioritize multimedia skills over critical thinking ability. The editors expect the students to acquire technical skills required in convergence newsroom in the J-schools when they are hired than learning them after joining the media (Ibid).

A national study conducted in 2003 to determine the impact of convergence on media industries and journalism education reveals that the ‘university journalism departments are also adapting to shifts in the industry and changing their curricula to reflect an emphasis on convergence’ (Camille Kraeplin and Carrie Anna Criado, 2005). The survey further revealed that ‘both media organizations and journalism educators appear to see convergence as important to the future of the profession. The vast majority of both newspapers and TV stations surveyed have forged convergence partnerships, defined as the sharing of content and/or staff with another media platform – around nine in 10 newspapers and eight in 10 TV stations. Likewise, university journalism programs have also moved toward convergence. Just under nine in 10 of the college administrators surveyed said they had incorporated, or begun to incorporate, cross-platform training into their coursework’ (Carrie Criado and Camille Kraeplin, 2003). ‘From 1998 to 2002, about 60% of the J-schools in the United States redesigned their curricula or developed new courses to prepare students for practicing news in multiple media platforms’ (Huang, 2003). A study supports the popular contention that both journalists and journalism educators believe specific convergence skills are valuable. Accordingly 9 in 10 (85%) of the
university programs included in a survey had responded to the convergence trend in the industry by retooling the curriculum. Huang study reveals that ‘more professors were theoretically equipped (81%) than technologically prepared (53%) to teach students how to report news in multiple media platforms. However, the majority of the professors (84%) added content about media convergence either to their existing courses or to new courses or participated in cross-media team-teaching’ (Ibid).

The Kansas’ converged curriculum was the focus of the study by Max Utsler in 2001. The study suggests a new program model that deviates from the traditional path and give up the sequence based course structure to embrace integrated concept (Utsler, 2002).

In 2002, a national survey of media writing teachers in journalism and mass communication programs conducted by Mark N.Popovich and Mark Masse found that almost 50 percent of accredited and non-accredited schools offered a converged writing class. ….Almost 40 percent of accredited school faculty and 50 percent of faculty at non-accredited programs said they planned to offer a converged writing class (Elizabeth Birge, 2004)

In another study, Daniels suggests a conceptual framework to assess the degree of curriculum reform in various programs. In his study, Daniels evolves a three dimensional structure on how a journalism/mass communication program may be defined (philosophy, stages and perception/predictor) (Daniels, 2002). Daniels quotes Foote who offered a framework called, ‘convergence engineering’ for curriculum reform. He identifies three stages in curriculum development: 1. Establishing a structure where all media can coexist and coalesce in the same place; 2. Bring together skill sets employed in different media into courses at the beginning
of the curriculum and carrying it through to specialization at the end; and 3. Integrating theoretical, non-skills courses with converged media perspective (Daniels. 2002).

A survey of journalism instructors and researchers was undertaken by David Bulla and Julie Dodd to find out ‘how they are dealing with convergence in their media writing classes and the basis of their curriculum decisions’ (Bulla and David, 2003). The findings of this survey show that ‘the majority of faculty members had incorporated convergence into their teaching. Seven of the nine programs would be categorized adopters, and even the two traditional programs included some elements of convergence in the curriculum (Ibid).

The study on the functioning of the first ever convergence newsroom created in the academic corridors at Brigham Young University (Hammond, Peterson, and Thomsen 2000) shows that initially the convergence newsroom suffered setbacks but later on ‘operated with relative consistency’. However, the analysis of students’ perspective of converged newsroom shows that the ‘integrated newsroom was a considerably more complex organization than the old organization. New students hoping to assimilate often reported the complexity to be overwhelming’ (Ibid).

The evaluation of the teaching convergence course at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Journalism makes interesting revelations. The study on Convergence Core Curriculum(CCC) that was introduced in 2002 reveals that both students and instructors agreed in the value of learning how to write across all three media- print, broadcast and online suggesting that problems in implementation apart there is support among students and instructors for the concept of convergence education

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One of the studies on the converged newsroom of the Brigham Young University supports the contention that the BYU convergence case has increased employability of the students (Scott Hammond, Thomsen and Peterson, 2000).

Stephen Quinn of Ball State University raises few fundamental issues of media convergence in his paper, ‘Convergence’s Fundamental Question’. The paper tries to define convergence and concludes that successful convergence satisfies the twin aims of good journalism and good business practices (Stephen Quinn, 2005).

Research on convergence has suffered as the concept has evaded definition. Further, the model of convergence is complex as it combines multiple media and therefore empirical studies have problems studying the impact as new research tools have to be developed to measure and interpret convergence. The convergence continuum model attempts to develop the conceptual and empirical tools needed to conduct studies in the structural–functional tradition of Laswell, White, and Breed (Dailey, Demo, and Spillman 2005). The convergence continuum study assumes importance ‘because it provides a common definition and an infrastructure on which researchers can build communication theory as it applies cross-media efforts’ (Ibid).

Most journalists working in American converged newsrooms saw the relative advantage of working in such media and felt, ‘overall, converged newsrooms are a good idea and convergence will prove to be a successful editorial strategy for the news industry’ (Singer 2003)

By 2002, journalism educators were as confused and exhausted as the professionals were by pondering over the challenge of preparing
multitasking journalism graduates. David Bulla recounts an interesting episode that took place in a conference on media convergence at the University of Florida in February 2002. ‘A reporter from a Tampa media company astonished the audience of journalism educators by revealing that she at the time was working on 31 stories’ (Bulla David, 2002).

Establishment of Tampa, the convergent newsroom and Newsplex, the convergent training facility in the early part of this century exerted tremendous pressure on journalism educators to initiate steps to redesign their curriculum.

Nevertheless, nearly 77% of the educators teaching convergence curricula believed that the changes in curriculum represented minor shift, that their curriculum has been altered some to accommodate the industry’s emphasis on convergence (Camille Kraeplin and Carrie Anna Criado, 2005). ‘Within the walls of academia, this blending of media has not produced a revolution in curriculum changes’ (Elizabeth Birge, 2004). Early studies indicate that few programs reflected a truly converged model (Camille Kraeplin and Carrie Anna Criado, 2003). The Huang study suggests that ‘the legitimacy of media mergers needs repeated tests before such mergers can be truly accepted as a healthy development and a full-force education of media convergence can be seen in many in J-schools (Huang 2003).

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