Journalism Education and the Perception of Convergence Journalism

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Abstract:

How relevant is journalism curriculum in preparing the students to meet new challenges posed by the emergence of new media? The pressures of communication revolution and the information revolution in the mid nineties compelled the journalism educators to debate alternate models of curriculum. They found the answer in convergence. There are different connotations of the term, "Convergence" and the term is defined and interpreted here within realms of journalism. Convergence in journalism is referred to as, 'multiple-platform publishing' or as 'integrated journalism' (Stephen Quinn, 2005).

In media, convergence has given new content generating and delivery platforms. In journalism education, convergence is perceived as imparting education and training across print, broadcast, and online media platforms.

Today television, broadband, cell phone and radio have converged to give news round the clock for different readers/listeners/viewers signaling the varied ways the news is delivered at the convenience of the audience. Like a web page convergence curriculum is dynamic requiring constant upgrading bridging the void between theory and practice.

This paper examines the different perspectives of educators and media professionals on convergence that is central to the process of teaching and learning. The present study reveals that convergence has been perceived technologically as well as theoretically as a process paving the way for integrated
model replacing the segregated model consequently guiding the retooling of curriculum.

**Introduction:**

It’s quite a while since Thomas L. Friedman wrote the infamous book, ‘The World is Flat’, where he flatly stated that, ‘…..what the flattening of the world means is that we are now connecting all the knowledge centers on the planet together into a single global network, which – if politics and terrorism do not get in the way- could usher in an amazing era of prosperity and innovation’ (Friedman, 2005).

In the age of networking and connecting people, there is increasing pressure on J-schools to update curriculum in order to prepare students for the multiple media technology newsroom of tomorrow. The question being posed is how relevant is journalism curriculum in preparing the students to meet new challenges posed by the emergence of new media? American schools of journalism have responded to the rapid changes in the media industry by reforming their curriculum but in the process, they may not have done it to the great satisfaction of the media professionals. The trend is whenever the media is in crisis it has blamed it on journalism educators as not measuring up to the expectations. History is replete with instances where arrival of new medium has always spread insecurity in the old media. When radio arrived, the newspaper felt insecure, as it feared that it would lose readers to the broadcast media. Newspaper continued to grow from strength to strength even after the invasion by the film and television. Ironically, it is the turn of all the three traditional media to feel apprehensive about the presence and impact of new media. The conventional media having worked in isolation all these years have suddenly realized the importance of bonding.
Technically, print, broadcast/radio and television no longer exists as independent entities as technology has changed their identity. After surveying 200 newspaper publishers worldwide, the World Association of Newspapers (WAN) found, "Despite a somewhat gloomy outlook for wholesale convergence in media companies worldwide in the near term, convergence is already being implemented with varying degrees of enthusiasm and speed among the world's media companies" (Stone, 2001). However, cross-media ownership has become a norm owing to convergence, the emergence of many media and one-voice trend therefore is the big concern of many critics. ‘Critics complain that such cross-ownership of both a television station and a newspaper in the same market is a threat to democracy because it limits the number of voices' (Anderson, 2002; Blethen, 2002; Foster, 2002; O’Conner, 2002; Tompkins, 2001; Tompkins and Stencel, 2002).

Inevitably, the J-schools have to respond, as there is a paradigm shift in the world of journalism. ‘The future of journalism education has been a subject of recent discussion throughout Europe, North America and Australia, in the wake of media convergence’. (Macdonald, Isabel 2006).

**What is Convergence?**

Howard I. Finberg quotes Larry Pryor, “the definition does matter because we are trying to come up with a common vocabulary in this new medium and if we all have a different concept of what convergence means, we are making it difficult to progress’ (Howard I. Finberg, 2003)

Convergence is defined as, ‘multiple-platform publishing’ or as ‘integrated journalism’ (Stephen Quinn, 2005).

Media convergence is defined as ‘a movement in the field of mass communications undertaken in the late twentieth century and now moving
quickly in the early twenty-first century, that weds previously competitive media delivery formats (platforms) to one another’ (Kenneth C. Killebrew 2005). ‘Convergence is using the resources at a newspaper to bolster the product on other media’ feels Keith Wheeler (Ibid).

"From the technological side…… the general concept has been to bring the platforms together to provide information to the public through shared multiple technical resources or pipelines…..On the information or content delivery side of convergence, the founding idea was to ensure relatively equal distribution of information through each platform, thus creating a partnering of equal information providers” (Ibid).

‘Convergence is what takes place in the newsroom as the editorial staff works together to produce multiple products for multiple platforms to reach a mass audience with interactive content on a 24/7 basis. Anything less is not journalism convergence’ point out Pryor (Stephen Quinn, 2005).

Today television, broadband, cell phone and radio have converged to give news round the clock for different readers/listeners/viewers signaling the varied ways the news is delivered at the convenience of the audience. ‘….convergence is a process whereby media companies break out of their traditional forms and formats to deliver richer news and information services more in concert with the way that consumers are choosing to access and use such resources’ says Kerry Northrup (Ibid).

‘Convergence is generally seen in terms of increasing co-operation and collaboration between formerly distinct media newsrooms’ thinks Mark Deuze (Ibid).

Endeavors have been made not only to understand convergence but also to categorize it based on its functions. Rich Gordon of Medill, Northwestern University has identified five forms of media convergence
namely, ownership convergence, tactical convergence, structural convergence, information-gathering convergence and storytelling convergence (Rich Gordon, 2003).

‘Convergence is all about creating super-journalists capable of doing everything’ says Andrew Nicholson, the Director of the American Press Institute’s Media. Howard I. Finberg wonders whether ‘convergence efforts might be more about finding ways to blend those different currents than about creating a single information stream that serves all readers-viewers-listeners’(Howard I. Finberg, 2003).

In journalism education, convergence is regarded as 'teaching students to think, report, and write across print, broadcast, and online media platforms'. (Castaneda, Laura; Murphy, Sheila; Hether, Heather Jane., 2005) Branded as multi-platform reporting, convergence takes all new kinds of new media ranging from websites to cell phones to blogs and to iPods.

From the educators perspective, convergence is meant to be a blurring of the lines between what have historically been distinct areas of study (i.e. broadcast and print journalism), the outcome of which is a ‘converged curriculum (Daniels, 2002).

It is inevitable for the journalism schools to retool the curriculum but the moot point is ‘if the industry can’t define convergence or measure what’s being done, how can educators teach it as part of the journalism curriculum’ asks Howard I. Finberg (Finberg, 2003).

**Beginnings of converged courses:**

As early as 1996 Joyce Dodd, then Director of School of Mass Communication, Virginia Commonwealth University began efforts to get more funds to establish new media center and said, ‘this (center) is what the newspaper industry needs. This is something the Associated Press and
newspaper managers think would be very effective as the 21st century demands different news products’ (Hammond, Scott C.; Petersen, Daniel, 2000), sowing the seeds of convergence in J-education.

The earliest story of teaching convergence refers to the program at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. ‘Early in 1996, the broadcast and print faculty at BYU agreed to bring the Daily Universe(circulation 30,000) and television and radio broadcast into one organization’ (Ibid). William Porter and Jay Rush, the faculty members of BYU were the coordinators of the establishment of first of its kind converged newsroom. BYU reacted early to the changes in the industry ‘by putting broadcast and print students in the same newsroom and required the class to do all assignments for every media’ (Elizabeth Birge, 2004). ‘Over five years, students and faculty of Brigham Young University created a converged newsroom that brought together student broadcast, print and online journalism into one organization’ (Hammond, Scott C.; Petersen, Daniel, 2000). BYU’s tryst with convergence in 1996 will also be remembered for using strategy-based planning called ‘future search’ to launch the first ever-converged newsroom that saw merger of print, broadcast and online in the classrooms. In spite of responding early to the call of convergence, BYU reverted to traditional journalism courses in 2005 (Ed Adams 2007). In 2004 one of the BYU faculty reacted, ‘it was just insane trying to put everyone through it. You can’t teach everything; some areas get watered down….we are still trying to figure it out’ thus revealing the frustration of the academia (Elizabeth Birge, 2004).

James Gentry who served as the Dean of the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Kansas ‘considered by many to be the pioneer in cross media preparation for
journalism students, developed a program with the faculty in 1997 (Ibid). William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Kansas is credited with retooling the program as early as 1997 and an early-adopter of the convergence curriculum. What made the KU program distinct was the instrumental role played by the Freedom Forum fellow Christopher Ryan who built a web database-publishing environment to serve the KU student media and promoted the use of the Internet for classroom management (Bulla David, 2002). Kansas is perhaps considered a leader in convergence plan in education and is hailed as the ‘most closely attuned to the converged media environment that is gradually spreading throughout the country’ (Ibid). At Kansas, a curriculum committee headed by Max Utsler took a radical decision to give up the method of tweaking the curriculum that was the conventional way of accommodating new subjects but instead developed a new curriculum from the scratch. ‘Everybody still keeps trying and thinking that they can tweak. So, we built it from scratch….from zero base. No, none of our old courses exists anymore… We built it with students in mind’ (Max Utsler, 2007).

The school of Journalism at Indiana University is one of the earliest to envision the concept of multimedia and submitted a proposal to the Knight Foundation to evolve a curriculum that would prepare the students for the 21st century. David Boeyink was the Director of the project and then Dean of the school, Trevor Brown was instrumental in getting funding to the tune of $1.5 million for the project from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation in 1995. The school is one of the foremost institutions to implement converged curriculum in Journalism education and to establish multi-media lab combining broadcast, photography and web design technology (David Boeyink 2007). They created a CD and launched a
website in 2004, the Convergence Forum, http://convergence.journalism.indiana.edu, ‘to offer a place for educators dealing with convergence and curriculum issues to submit materials and ideas’, and to share information about the experience of teaching convergence for more than 10 years (Boeyink, 2007).

An innovative ‘multimedia journalism’ course experience was given to the students at the famous Tampa media house by the University of South Florida’s School of Mass Communications in early 2001. Students of USF received practical lessons in high-level convergence at the hands of the converged journalists under the virgin environs of the first model of media convergence at the News Center’s three main media platforms: The Tampa Tribune, WFLA-TV News Channel 8, and their online partner, TBO.com. (TBO.com).

Tracing the history of convergence curriculum leads one to the Annenberg School of Journalism at the University of Southern California being one of the earliest to evolve Convergence Core Curriculum (CCC) in 2002 with a motto of keeping the course flexible enough to prepare the students for any media in the professional market. The Annenberg School adopted its version of convergence curriculum in the Fall of 2002 and replaced the heavily print oriented curriculum (Kersten A. Kappmeyer 2004, Laura, Sheila, Heather 2005).

In 2002, the Ball State University in Muncie, IN adopted a convergence curriculum and created an integrated multi-media lab facility, with a belief that ‘regardless of exactly what a newsroom looked like in five or 10 years, they want their students to be familiar with more than one medium’( Elizabeth Birge, 2004). Quoting Papper she adds ‘the only thing one is sure of is that in five to 10 years newsrooms are going to look
different than they do now’ justifying the preparation of students with broader set of skills (Ibid).

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's College of Journalism and Mass Communications that started journalism as early as 1894 retooled its curriculum and deviated from the path of traditional journalism. In the year 2004, the College of Journalism and Mass Communication ventured to tread the path of convergence to keep pace with the rapid changes in technology (http://www.unl.edu). The School’s Dean Will Norton claims that it enabled the school to break walls between the departments.

The establishment of the state of art convergence news centre-Newsplex in November 2002 at a cost of $ 2.5 million by Ifra, renowned as the world’s first convergence newsroom facility at the University of South Carolina, Columbia in US gave opportunity for journalism educators to understand how media landscape was changing with multiple delivery platforms. Newsplex is a convergence training facility with opulent state of art 12-seat newsroom imparting training to journalists and academicians in convergence. Journalists from different parts of the world visit and receive training in convergence at Newsplex. Randy Covington, the present Director of Newsplex says ‘it is a training facility…It is not the physical facility. We are talking about Newsplex in terms of philosophy of convergence. What really important is that the philosophy, the concept behind it. We are not putting out the newspaper, we are not trying to put TV newscast but rather we are trying to figure out how to cover the story for different media in a way that is most effective for each media’ (Randy Covington 2007).

The arrival of Newplex brought to the fore the change in the perception of news. ‘An understanding of convergence is an understanding that the way people consume news has changed profoundly… news
organizations have to realize that their audiences have changed and media consumption pattern have changed….stories are told differently in different media’ (Randy Covington 2007). These developments had an impact on journalism education as schools realized that they needed new inputs in their news writing courses. Convergence is all about change in mindset than about technology says Randy Covington; ‘in 2002,03, 04 and even in 2005, I would say in Newsplex that a story must be reported first on the Internet and in Newsplex I would see the face going red. No, never. I am a newspaper reporter and I will never break my story on the internet’ (Ibid). Therefore, what has happened since 2002 is much greater recognition of convergence. Newsplex launched ‘The Convergence Newsletter’ on July 1, 2003 to provide a forum for discussion of media convergence (Vol. 1 No.1).

The Newsplex Affiliates Program was created in 2001 to train journalists and journalism educators in teaching and practicing convergence journalism. The program is serving as the clearinghouse sharing information required for retooling the curriculum in various journalism programs (August E.Grant, 2003).

Charles Bierbaur, the Dean of the University of South Carolina’s College of Mass Communication and Information Studies proclaims in the Newsplex website that it is the place where world learns about convergence, its goal is to help the news organizations, and strategic communicators prepare for the future.

University of South Carolina, the home of Newsplex has been evaluating curricular changes continuously and it was in 2002-03 that they introduced visual communication as a major to bring the elements of convergence in the program. (Keith Kenney, 2007).

The Missouri School of Journalism is in the forefront in
implementing a fully converged curriculum by creating a separate major in convergence on par with Newspaper Journalism, Photography, Broadcast, Advertising and Magazine in Fall 2002 (Mike McKean, 2007). Perhaps for the first time in the history of American journalism education, the school of journalism at Missouri takes the credit for making conceptual change by creating a convergence faculty alongside the conventional faculties.

The journalism education at Southern Methodist University is one of the oldest programs that began as early as 1922 founded by a distinguished member of the profession H.R.Knickerbocker. Meadows school of arts is one of few schools that reconfigured the curriculum and eliminated the track system to evolve a journalism core curriculum in 2005 and the first batch of students trained in convergence graduated in 2007 (Camille Kraeplin 2007).

The convergence programs in the universities across US generated diverse views, some positive and others negative; ‘Students feel ‘like guinea pigs’ (Merchant, 2002); ‘With convergence, it's like you become the jack of all trades, and the master of nothing’ (Kinmartin, 2003); ‘convergence is very good and will help me in the future,’; ‘All my life I dreamed of being a news anchor in a television news station. I worked hard, got into a good program (Converged newsroom), and now I am on a team that does a half dozen things I am not interested in’ (Hammond, Peterson and Thomsen 2000). ‘The new program is very cool and is the main reason for me enrolling at USC’ (Merchant, 2002).

**Perception of Convergence:**

There are different connotations of the word convergence and the way the journalism educators have perceived convergence is noteworthy. Most of the respondents at least feel there is recognition that there is real
convergence (David Perlmutter 2007). ‘The basic idea of convergence is the merging in complex ways of different kinds of media’ says Journalism educator, David Boeyink who headed the convergence project in early 1990s at the Indiana University, Bloomington (Boeyink, 2007). ‘It is journalists operating an equally adoptable any number of platforms, either platform we know now or platforms we cannot even predict’ says Thomas Goldstein of Berkeley while also agreeing that convergence has captured the attention of teachers and students.

Convergence is generally perceived as technological process. However, Randy Covington of Newsplex, who heads the first converged newsroom training facility in USA, does not seem to agree. He says, ‘People often think convergence in terms of technologies. People often think of convergence in terms of delivery platforms, audio, video, print and so forth. Yes, technology does in fact include the delivery platforms. The key point is how we think about stories we cover’ (Randy 2007). Randy does not seem to agree that technology is overwhelming in convergence as he advocates that ‘Newsplex is a philosophy and it is a philosophy that is based upon telling stories rather than focusing on production’ (Randy 2007).

Rich Gordon who has contributed profound literature on convergence says, ‘technology is part of journalism but I don’t think it is the only driver. I think ultimately the driver is the audience, their behaviour, their wants, needs and technology is both making it possible for companies that are not journalism companies to do things that historically only journalists could do’(Rich Gordon 2007).

One of the attributes of convergence is the audience’s perception of news media. Audience appears to be the most intriguing factor in understanding convergence. Randy Covington says, ‘I think that for me an
understanding of convergence is an understanding that the way people consume news has changed profoundly’. (Randy 2007).

Gil Thelen, Publisher and President of the Tampa Tribune, one of the earliest advocates of convergence says that he dislikes the term, 'convergence' and prefers to call it as 'coverage partners' instead of convergence (Kenneth C.Killebrew, 2005).

Michael Parks of ASC regrets using the term convergence at all. ‘I wish we hadn’t used it (Convergence). I think labels are a trap…. What is converged really even more than some media are the users- readers, listeners and the viewers… When you chase convergence, you are actually chasing something that may never really exist’. Edward Adams quotes the vice president of the national public radio who declared in a AEJMC conference in early February 2007 that ‘convergence is dead’ because convergence is the end point but the way things are going it is anything but the end point so it is superfluous to use the term convergence anymore. 'I don’t call it as convergence. To me convergence is the end point where everything comes together. I just do not see that….Convergence is really not an issue anymore' points out Edward Adams, Chair, Department of Communications, Brigham Young University, speaking out of his decade old experimentation with converged curriculum. Many educators agree that the real convergence is still elusive.

According to Rich Gordon of Medill, Northwestern university, the ultimate converged sort of organization would be one where the reporter the actual frontline person who deals with the public and gets information is actually expected to get that information in multiple forms and may be to even tell the story in multiple ways for multiple media and I would say we still don’t see very much of that’ (Rich Gordon,2007).
According to Mike McKean, Chair of Convergence faculty at Missouri School, convergence means whole lot of different things. ‘Convergence can be working in a traditional news organization that is using all of the media platforms that are available to tell your stories. Convergence can be working in strictly on-line environment and creating some new forms of journalistic story-telling’ and convergence can be more of a business application involving different media (Mike McKean, 2007). Convergence goes beyond working across platforms of media in traditional forms argues some. Camille Kraeplin says, ‘Convergence is any activity that involved cross-platform work but the more that I studied convergence, I think it goes beyond simply cross platform work. I think it involves layers, it involves creation and conceptual sharing’ (Camille Kraeplin 2007).

For some the emphasis is on content rather than on media in converged environment. Many educators have echoed the viewpoint that ‘convergence in essence is telling a story across multiple media platforms. Convergence is seen more as an expansion of traditional ways of telling a story from a very broad journalistic reporting and editing standpoint (Cecile Holmes, 2007).

David Perlmutter of Kansas University, known for their successful journalism program in convergence says that, ‘convergence recognizes that there is one practice i.e., content creation and dissemination and that there are various technologies for doing that……. What is most important for students to understand is what talents are required and skills and cognitive applications to creating content in the first place regardless of platform or venue’(David Perlmutter 2007).

The attributes of multiple media are so overlapping that Kristie Bunton points out, it is about blurring of lines between traditional
formulated format venues. Practically, the reporter of today faces technology issues as he is expected by his news organization to post entries in the blog, filing story for the newspaper and streaming the video. So, it becomes harder to decide where the lines are and what the distinctions are. (Kristie Bunton 2007).

Some journalism educators like Rick Musser prefers to use the term multimedia instead of convergence. Today print is employing video kids, broadcast needs print graduates, and it is in this perspective that journalism educators perceive convergence as being related with multimedia skills. ‘When we started out, convergence was generally characterized as newspaper and TV operations coming together to produce a combined converged news product. What really is happening now is TV stations need more and more people who can edit copy and text and newspapers need more and more people who can take video and edit video. (Rick Musser 2007).

Edward Adams says that it is multimedia and not convergence. ‘When I looked at convergence, we looked at the total convergence meaning integration of the newsroom, the curriculum, reporters and editors’ routines, news gathering efforts, even the financial structure of the environment and we found there were lot of things that did not work well. So we have taken back the approach.……….. I refer this as cooperative venture producing multimedia products’. (Edward Adams 2007).

The concept of convergence continues to be debated in the corridors of J-schools. ‘If there are levels or depths of convergence, what is the first level, second level and the ultimate convergence?’ (Rich Gordon 2007), educators continue to ponder. Is convergence dead? Yes, perhaps the phrase is but not the concept it symbolizes.
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