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REFORMING J101:

Fire in the Hole: Curricular Explosion, Fearless Journalism Pedagogy, and Media Convergence

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Journalism education in the first decade of the 21st century has taken hits from all sides and remains—as has been true for generations—an underfunded, underpaid, oft-misunderstood endeavor. Yet it stands as a catalyst for innovation in American journalism, shaping women and men into change-agents for tomorrow's media. This essay will suggest that the pedagogical and administrative courage necessary when journalism education was established in the United States will continue to be needed as educators find ways of sending successful graduates into media industries that are shrinking, shifting, and shaking with tremors of profound change.

Pioneers of Journalism Pedagogy and Their Critics

Gutsy, innovative pedagogy traces to the earliest days of education for journalism in this country. Willard Grosvenor Bleyer founded the American Association of Teachers of Journalism—precursor to AEJMC—in 1912 as a support system for those willing to prove semester by semester, as he was, that what happened in newsrooms of his day came from concepts and skills that really could be taught (Sloan, 1990, p. 77). Bleyer was part of a cadre of courageous journalism educators, at what were then small programs, daring to claim they could bring order and vision to what seemed a volatile, intractable vocation (Martin & Stewart, 1996, pp. 67-76). Former Confederate General Robert E. Lee, as president of Washington College in the 1860s, helped push forward a journalism curriculum, first discussed two decades earlier, that survived only as long as he did. Lee died in 1870, shortly after the start of fall classes. One historian speculates that what killed his journalism institute idea was pressure from the established press of the time (Mirando, 1995).

Nearly 40 years after Lee's death, Joseph Pulitzer's famous essay in the North American Review took to task those who denied that journalism could become a pedagogy; either one had what it took to be a good journalist or one didn't, went the newsroom logic of the time. Pulitzer countered that better-educated journalists could become visionaries of the Fourth Estate—officers on the bridge of a storm-tossed vessel (Pulitzer, 1908, pp. 641-680).

The burden of proof for journalism education still lies with journalism educators. Professional journalists' disdain is still evident against any who would claim insight about the practices of street-level journalists or their editors, or theories about what they do and why (Taylor, 2003, pp. 187-195; Dickson & Brandon, 2000, pp. 50-67). From Pulitzer's time through the 20th century, that disdain has stemmed, in part, from a newspaper and magazine culture (similar to that surrounding broadcast news), flush with profitability and improving technology. By the 1940s, the men and women who pounded out the news, using the technology, were part of a culturally accepted elite—fixtures of middle class professionalism (Bled-

stein, 1978, pp. 46-49; Altschull, 1984, pp. 119-124).

By the end of the 20th century, though, not only were the technologies of news media falling behind innovations of other media, profitability for the news media was eroding quickly (Baumann, 2010, p. 8; Harris, 2001, p. 106). And troubling questions were arising about how journalism should be defined. Worse still, debate was brewing about whether journalism's place in society was as important as had been accepted for generations (Claussen, 2010, p. 117; Quinn, 2004, p. 111; Feola, 1996, p. 18). Young people—the very ones considering schools and majors—seemed most at risk of losing faith in journalism as something they cared about, let alone something they would pursue as a profession (Mindich, 2005, pp. 5-12).

The View From the Street:
When It's Not About Us Anymore

Part of the work of AEJMC over the decades has been to guide member faculty, along with the administrators who lead them—members of AEJMC or not—into adopting the best practices in pedagogy for careers in journalism, communication, and media. For a century, the consensus, albeit under much debate, has been that the fundamentals students must know—after a thorough grounding in the liberal arts—are writing, reporting, editorial judgment, applied ethics for media, and constitutional law as applied to media (Cullier & Schwalbe, 2010, pp. 28-31; King, 2008, p. 166). In simpler form, these were educational approaches used by journalism educators a century earlier. But taken by themselves, these would appear not to suffice for today's changing media world or the students now entering our classrooms.

There is little doubt that journalism still needs good writers. And reporting still matters; those who craft news should know how to put authoritative research behind their assertions. News must still be timely and should be written in the context of events—answering the "so what?" question.

But the "so what" has become a more complicated problem. The targeting of readers—something feature magazines and entertainment broadcast media have wrestled with for decades—has become the driving force behind change in newspaper journalism, not only in the United States but in much of the Western world. In Bleyer's day, journalists set the agenda. Today—and, it can be expected, increasingly so in coming decades—audiences do, and will (Ferreira, Tillson, & Salwen, 2000, p. 61; Hartley, 2008, p. 679; Sutu, 2011, p. 48).

One of the reasons some inattentive Americans have called journalism a dead or dying enterprise is that they have misinterpreted what is happening to audiences for journalism. Steadily shrinking circulation figures for newspapers and nosediving ratings for evening newscasts would seem to suggest audiences for news journalism are going away. They are not, but, rather, are fragmenting, as they have been for decades (Steverak, 2010; Souder, 2009).

We all know that those most faithful to their daily news, the real readers, are older (in their late 30s and into their 70s). They look for the stories and news formats they grew up with. The younger ones—our students among them—are interested not just in what The *New York Times* or *Washington Post* say they should know; they want specialty news (e.g. sports or business or fashion or technology), and they do not want to wait. They have shorter attention spans year by year, and they are multitaskers. They'll take the news if it's fresh, even a few words on a Twitter feed. Some still want a good, long read, but others want pictures, too—preferably in a slide show with an audio track. Today's consumers of journalism like the sounds and action of video, even if that video is a short clip, and even if it's grainy and jerky like what they see on YouTube or Facebook. And they want to participate in the news they are consuming. That participation is increasingly cross-cultural and multilingual as the planet becomes a global village (Erdal, 2007, p. 51; Pavlik, 2004, p. 21; Robinson, 2010, p. 125; Consumers, 2002, pp. 4-18).

We know a lot about these new media audiences—except when we don't. The inherent presumptions about the shift from traditional audiences to those with a convergent mindset are that audiences are active; yet these are presumptions that have not been tested empirically enough to know what that activity means—or how much of it will be a lasting set of behaviors (Sundet & Ytreberg, 2009, p. 383). We simply don't know enough about audiences to totally ditch the approaches to how we teach students about reading, writing, visual literacy, or the making of meaning in journalistic storytelling. Yet the gnawing question all innovative teachers of journalism are asking is how to teach students news judgment when the media world is becoming increasingly entrepreneurial and audience-targeted.

Furthermore, some of the youngest audience members are moving toward a preference for the im-

age, rather than for narrative. And the suspicion we all have is that the problem goes deeper than their not wanting to read. Some cannot read—and don't care about it, for a variety of reasons (de la Piedra, 2010, p. 575; Stevens, 2011, p. 133). In Pulitzer's day, literacy among nonslave adults was at more than 90 percent. And the relentless push of newspapers into new communities across the continent brought with it a hunger for literacy and an understanding of the world that tied in with civic pride and involvement in local business and local politics (Tyack & Hansot, 1982, pp. 29, 52-53). Today, nearly 50 percent of American adults read at a low-literacy level. Less than 20 percent read at a high level (National Assessment, 2003; Sum, 2007).

One study of reading by college-age students showed that they retain facts more readily if they are forced to multitask while reading or if there is background noise than if there is total silence (Lin, Robertson, & Lee, 2009, p. 169). But if the notion that great reading produces great writing is true, slipping literacy skills and the shift to convergent media raise troubling questions not only about reading but about what writing instruction should look like for journalism educators (Alexander, 2008, p. 1).

Getting Students to Get It: Practical Approaches For Today's Educators

To say that journalism students must learn convergence has become a truism. In fact, it's a notion—even in its relative infancy within American higher education—that some scholars and industry watchers want to guard against misdirection (King, 2010, p. 126). What convergence should look like in the college or university catalog can be a tricky thing to pin down. Professionals are still not providing much input about what they want in the people they hire to provide convergence coverage for their audiences (Adams, 2008, p. 81); in some cases—harkening backto an educational mode Robert E. Lee envisioned, one as old as the medieval guilds—newsrooms are hiring students to help with journalistic heavy lifting, and these new hires learn on the job, training that's sometimes funded by grant money. How much convergence journalism these young people do is unclear (Roush, 2009, p. 42).

It should be noted, as an aside, that the best high school journalism teachers grasp the importance of convergent trends—though only a few get the funding or support from administrators to teach convergence well (Roschke, 2009, p. 55). It should also be noted that not all students are as eager as their faculty to take a major leap out of the traditional curriculum. For all the hype about late teens and twenty-somethings being outside-the-box thinkers and techno-whizzes, these are young people clawing their way through an American educational system that's uneasy with preparing them for a media future. And in a shaky economy, students—and their checkbook-carrying parents—like what has seemed to have worked in the past (Filak, 2006, p. 48). Many of the freshmen in our classrooms, for instance, have been told that great writing and reporting will open career doors for them. A study published in 2008 showed that 40 percent of print journalism majors said they expected to find work in publications and only 3 percent said they would look for work in online journalism (Adams, Brunner, & Fitch-Hauser, 2008, p. 1).

If it's difficult to get funding for new approaches to journalism teaching, it's tougher to find faculty who know how to do it (Ying, 2010). And though more college and university journalism faculty are pursuing convergence in their teaching, they have been slow to break out of the tendency to organize curriculum and create classes in traditional sequences like print journalism, visual journalism, broadcast journalism, and public relations.

A study in 2005 showed that about half of some 300 mass communication programs had taken steps toward teaching convergence, but the study called them "cautious" steps. The study also showed that smaller programs have a greater tendency to build convergence into their curriculum than larger universities—the smaller the school, the smaller the fortresses and silos erected through the politics and funding structures of generations past. Ironically, Washington and Lee University—where Robert E. Lee had made a pioneering effort at journalism education more than a century ago—got special mention in the 2005 study for the silos it was struggling to overcome in implementing convergent media instruction (Lowrey, Daniels, & Becker, 2005, p. 32). A tricky piece of the flexibility-for-convergent-pedagogy struggle is the strictures of accreditation by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC)—a regimen smaller schools tend to bypass, or are unable to achieve (Seamon, 2010, p. 10).

In all fairness, some of the caution by faculty—slowness to dive headlong into creative and potentially risky convergent instruction—could be shrewd attention to their institution's faculty manual for pro-

motion and tenure. Highlighting innovative teaching is not as convincing to some—maybe most—promotion committees or provosts at research universities as is emphasizing traditional scholarly studies and research of media in more acceptable formats (Whitman, Hendrickson, & Townsend, 1999, p. 99; Mencher, 2002.) Indeed, one scholar argues that to suggest a nonscholarly analysis of, or pedagogical intervention in, what's happening to the media industries betrays the purpose of academia—an argument, it should be noted, that the Hutchins Commission faced as well (Macdonald, 2006, p. 745).

Dane Claussen, editor of *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator,* has pointed out that to "blow up" a journalism curriculum is harder to do than to talk about. He suggests that one of the best approaches involves team teaching and multidisciplinary endeavors in single classes and in entire curricula (Claussen, 2009, p. 136). Research in 2008 on convergent journalism team-teaching approaches at small colleges and universities supports Claussen—with some caveats. The newer the students are to a program, the more they need to hear from one faculty member, at least a majority of the time. The more advanced the students, the more benefit they draw from faculty collaboration. The study also points out that to really work, collaborative teaching for convergence takes buy-in from administrators; team teaching can be messy to build into a curriculum and to fit into the sometimes-rigid accounting practices behind faculty teaching load (Auman & Lillie, 2008, p. 360).

One tactic faculty have pursued, drawn from pedagogies in the humanities—some born from the pressure of high student-faculty ratios—is peer-to-peer, or portfolio learning. In this approach, applied to convergence, students are urged to make discoveries by means of self-guided experimentation and innovation with multiplatform storytelling, sharing discoveries with each other using digital portfolios (Donnelly, 2010). The technique, at worst, can be a cover for unprepared faculty in technical classrooms; at its best, however, it can be an unleashing of student entrepreneurial thinking that invites the next generation of digital journalists to step into leadership.

Faculty who will be most successful in riding the waves of convergent change in journalism and media pedagogies must be willing—like those in newsrooms and media locations across the nation today—to educate themselves in new approaches. That's not easy when the tools and concepts are still emerging, and fast.

But programs across the nation are doing it. A 2011 study showed that a kind of generalized, unofficial curriculum for convergence is emerging across the AEJMC membership. Web design, or a course like it, was offered at more than 70 percent of 110 schools that responded to surveys. Nearly that many offer a course with a name like "Convergent Journalism"—combining narrative, at least, with audio and video. More than half had a course in digital or multimedia storytelling and a course in the theory of digital or "new" media. News reporting, in many programs, had been re-crafted through the lens of digital media and given a new name such as "digital reporting" or "multimedia reporting." Animation as applied to journalism or virtual-world media was not a course many schools offered. Across these schools, full-time faculty tended to teach the theory; part-timers taught the hands-on courses. But a majority of programs found a way of blending theory with hands-on instruction when possible. The more technical the course, at most schools, the smaller the enrollment cap (Sarachan, 2011, pp. 165-173).

But how to catch up if one's department or school is behind the curve? At the turn of the 21st century, few textbooks on the market gave total attention to convergent journalism. The market today has many more textbooks from which to choose. Online resources abound—some from educators, some from media companies such as Apple or Adobe. Some of the earliest convergent instruction grew out of the teaching and research of faculty at—or connected with—the WAN-IFRA Newsplex, which has been housed at the University of South Carolina since 2002 and draws staffing and funding, in part, from the university's College of Mass Communication and Information Studies. (History of Newsplex, n.d.) Many other universities have created successful digital or convergent media programs at the undergraduate or graduate level.

But South Carolina's Newsplex runs workshops for faculty and professionals from across the U.S. and other countries on convergent practices, and produces a teaching-friendly publication (in print and online), *The Convergence Newsletter.* Newsplex also sponsors and promotes research on convergence in cooperation with AEJMC, the National Communication Association, and media trade groups, such as the National Association of Black Journalists and the Society of Professional Journalists. Newsplex hosts scholarly

colloquiums devoted to the interplay of media with business, economics, history, and culture. Smart educators in programs large and small also benefit from the colloquia, grants, and workshops—some of them online and on-demand—available from such organizations as The Poynter Institute for Media Studies (Poynter) and its NewsU, the American Press Institute (API), and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), which have, for many years, provided faculty opportunities for training in the latest trends in media technology—building a network of sympathetic compatriots on the journey toward relevant and effective media teaching and learning.

Conclusion: The More Pedagogies Change, The More They Don't

For more than a century, the dual bottom lines for undergraduate educators aiming to equip students to enter journalism and its related professions have been service to democracy and a willingness to be marginalized in the pursuit of student success. The earliest attempts at journalism teaching by pioneers as prominent as Robert E. Lee and Joseph Pulitzer were the subject of derision and disdain. Yet, the growth of formalized education for journalism and media in this country has been exponential over the last century, manifesting itself in effective curricula at colleges and universities large and small, private and state-funded.

Convergence of media is, in many ways, both an uncharted path and a revisiting of media transitions that professionals and the U.S. communications industries have navigated for generations. Teaching in the digital era is still an invitation to learn. Done with tenacity, creativity, flexibility, and humor, it can be successful, even with the most reticent or doubtful students. Research noted in this essay suggests that those who will be most successful in creating effective pedagogies in the coming decades will be those with the courage to jettison teaching approaches that serve outmoded media or that are naïve to the true needs and interests of audiences. Successful teachers must, themselves, become learners of new approaches—to media and to students—and find ways of overcoming the doubts and resistance of reluctant administrators. These teachers will also, alone or in collaboration with faculty from other disciplines—or other institutions—persuade administrators to invest money and allow the time necessary for the perfecting of approaches that can harness student energy to the hard work of making multiplatform meaning in the 21st century.

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