

JOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF MEDIA CONVERGENCE: A SURVEY OF UNDERGRADUATES' TECHNOLOGY-RELATED NEWS HABITS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Web and its related technologies have significantly influenced not only the ways that news is consumed, but also how journalism education and the training of news professionals are undertaken. Consequently, many undergraduate journalism programs are now grappling with curriculum issues that didn't previously exist, such as whether to immerse students in writing/reporting that spans across media platforms or cling to the tradition of dividing students into specialized journalistic tracks.

With 5,000-plus newspapers worldwide currently offering online editions, "the Internet is an essential link for scholars and students studying journalism." It is not surprising, then, that "the effects of new communication technologies are forcing [journalism education] to expand, whether we like it or not."

Undeniably, the Internet has influenced the news habits of society, and especially among a younger and better-educated demographic. Similarly, Yau and Al-Hawamdeh report that "the Internet, with its headline news format and its capacity for quick updates, is clearly attractive to younger news consumers. The Internet's hypertext-based ability to provide more depth on a subject also appeals to those with large news appetites ... [and] as a result, the growth of Internet news has had a dramatic impact on the way people with access to technology get information on business and financial matters."

Although communication theorist McLuhan has said the content of any medium is always another medium, it is economic pressures that have fueled the efficiency-focused trend for media companies to have a single news staff instead of two or more. Related to this, Outing reports that "today's writers will be wise to look upon the craft of writing and reporting as requiring multiple talents. If you gain some additional skills—such as the ability to knock off an audio segment to accompany a text article—you'll be more attractive to employers and command a higher salary."

Thanks to media convergence, then, which has been cited as the most significant development in the news industry

during the past century, journalists now operate in an age where "writers increasingly are being asked to perform other communication tasks, from recording audio, to shooting photographs and video, to participating in interactive discussions with readers"

As for the need for journalists to train across media platforms, Kraeplin and Criado warn that "those entering a convergence environment today are encountering a complex system," where the ever-increasing demands "of a converged media system ensure that ... journalists' careers will be less stable and predictable than in the past," thanks to the new reality that today's reporters will likely experience a career that crosses into other media versus one that never diverts from its original journalistic discipline or medium.

II. PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study sampled the news-reading habits of undergraduates at a single university for the purposes of augmenting and synthesizing the available body of knowledge surrounding contemporary journalism in practice and from an educational standpoint.

Although research on interactive communication technology has begun to emerge, research that specifically deals with news consumption and the news-reading habits of the public, including college students, in the age of the Internet remained limited at the time this study was undertaken.

Related to this, "There is a constructive role that universities can and ought to play in determining the future direction of journalism on the Internet," as well as how journalism is taught within higher education.

Subsequently, any identifiable patterns or motivators of news consumption, especially where one medium is chosen over another, provides valuable information for the creators and practitioners of news and media sources, including newspaper editors, online editors and page designers, as well as for some sociologists and those engaged in teaching and designing journalism curriculum at the undergraduate level.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Defining Journalism Education*

Although research about journalism and among journalists has been theorized, studied and critically analyzed by many from a variety of disciplines, a lack of consensus exists within the dialogue concerning journalism studies. According to some, this deficit in consensus remains in place because as a field, journalism is forced to balance between the industry and the university, each of which possesses a unique set of institutionalized assumptions and expectations. Related to this, one communication scholar has observed that journalism education is “neither fish nor fowl; it feels itself unloved by the industry and tolerated, barely, by the academy.”

Reportedly, even newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer had misgivings now and again about the appropriateness of journalism as a program of study within the university. Adding to the identity crisis of journalism education is the variety of perspectives or disciplines employed by those who try to understand journalism and its related studies; namely, those trained in the social sciences and those scholars who hail from critical humanities backgrounds.

In academe, internal debates about where journalism’s rightful home should be continue to exist. In fact, per some observers and media historians, one of the key factors that slowed the growth and development of journalism education in the United States during the last century occurred when the founders of communication studies as a distinct discipline decided journalism’s home was in this academic area. During this time “the focus of communication studies not only ignored the practice of journalism but was often philosophically opposed to the values and mission of journalism. Communication studies, in much of its research, focused on learning to control the mass audience rather than on how to serve the information needs of citizens. ... [Moreover, there was a] lack of respect that communication studies scholars often had for journalists and for those who taught journalism. Rather than seeing the skills of journalism as intellectual skills, they saw them as ‘toys.’”

With these challenges not so far in their past, then, contemporary journalism educators and scholars, in today’s fast-paced, technology-driven media environment, are left little time to contemplate how to best define journalism education in its current state or its ideal role. However, as one journalism scholar has observed, “Neither practicing journalists nor journalism educators can afford to stop asking basic questions—like ‘What is news?’—in the rapidly changing environment that has become a staple of today’s world.”

B. *Barriers to Convergence*

Defined as “teaching students to think, report, and write across print, broadcast and online media platforms” , convergence is often a topic of debate more than it is a teaching practice in today’s journalism classrooms. Further, in spite of the fact that many U.S. newspapers and television stations have maintained an online presence for a number of years now,

some of the nation’s journalism programs have not fully embraced training journalism students to work in multiple-media platforms: “[W]ithin the walls of academia, this blending of media has not produced a revolution of curriculum changes. In fact, as colleges and universities work to prepare the next generation of journalists, what skills and knowledge they need to compete in the modern media age—and who is going to teach them these skills and share this knowledge—is a subject being debated more often than it’s being taught.”

Among the most basic of obstacles to incorporating convergence training across the journalism curriculum is the reality that convergence continues to be an elusive term that is used in various contexts and often ambiguous in its definition. Beyond this initial barrier, some simply aren’t quite ready for the full incorporation of convergence in the curriculum for reasons associated with quality. Related to this, “You’re depleting journalism when you split up that [journalist’s] focus” by asking him or her to perform multiple jobs, declares Healy.

Others, meanwhile, fear that if convergence becomes the norm, many journalists might “become too busy to verify the information they find and resort to publishing material supplied by professional spin-doctors” or “get so busy providing content for multiple platforms that they simply do not have the time to reflect or analyze”. Similarly, those within Canada’s Newspaper Guild also are concerned about convergence “diluting” journalists’ work.

In looking at existing media outlets, another key issue surrounding convergence is the need for a workable business model, with guidelines and maps for those seeking to plan or implement any kind of multiple-platform publishing. With no available models to call on, convergence meets yet another roadblock. Moreover, in some areas, such as Australia and New Zealand, another inhibitor to widespread convergence is legislation that prohibits a company from owning both a television station and a daily newspaper in the same media market.

Lastly, cultural barriers also influence the rate of convergence in the workplace and in the classroom. Within a working newsroom, for instance, there are multiple cultures; hence, when convergence is employed, such as mixing traditional print journalists with broadcast journalists or producers and on-air staff members, even more cultures are added to the workplace environment. Consequently, when broadcast and print cultures are intermingled in a single media environment, cultural barriers are inevitable.

“Convergence actually increases the complexity of cultural relationships within a newsroom within a company and within the corporate boardroom,” observes Quinn, who notes that differences in common language is another culturally based barrier that divides print and broadcast journalists.

In short, then, differing attitudes about convergence in the “real-world” of media organizations carry over to the academy, where those who teach journalism also come from different areas of journalistic specialization and hold area-specific

allegiances to those specializations; namely, print and broadcast. Not surprisingly, then, if there is confusion about the widespread implementation of convergence within media organizations, there also will be confusion surrounding the need to fully adopt convergence into the undergraduate curricula.

C. *Prior news habits research*

Various studies have examined mass media use by adults, and more specifically, college students. However, because of rapid growth within the electronic-media industry and the widespread accessibility of the Internet in recent years, it is once more strategic and important to survey the news-consumption habits among a college-age population.

Regarding previous media use among the college-age audience, it has been suggested that females tend to watch more television, read fewer newspapers and listen to the radio more than males within the same age group. Researchers also have indicated that as education and income increase, so does newspaper reading but TV viewing witnesses a notable decline. Past research also has suggested that newspapers were the No. 1 choice for local news and detailed information, with television news being the overall top news source choice for both national and international events among the college audience. Other related findings suggest that, among this demographic, general media consumption and its perceived importance increase with each year in college.

Most recently, the findings of one news-related study indicated that (a) more college graduates age 50 and younger connect to the Internet each day than regularly view a network news broadcast and that (b) about 50 million Americans utilize the Internet for news on a daily basis. However, there remains ample room to learn more about Internet and electronic media news sites in relation to undergraduates and their news-reading habits.

D. *Research Questions*

- How frequently do undergraduate students utilize traditional newspapers versus Web-based news sites to acquire news?
- What kinds of news (e.g., entertainment news, financial news, international news, sports, etc.) is most commonly accessed by undergraduate news consumers?
- Which online news sites do students most frequently access for news?
- Which news sites do students consider to be most credible?
- How often do undergraduate students engage in news-related media convergence?
- Do interactive features associated with online news sites (e.g., videos or slide shows) make consuming Web-based news more appealing to students?

IV. METHOD

This study was approached using a mixed-methodology that employed a researcher-designed questionnaire and focus groups. The participating undergraduate completed a survey instrument composed of 27 Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions. In addition to seeking basic demographic information, the survey was designed to explore the news-reading habits of this population, including frequency and consistency of use of a particular news medium.

Study participants, all ages 18 and older, were enrolled at a state-funded university during the 2010 academic year. Convenience sampling was utilized to conduct the research; participation was strictly voluntary, with no identifying information sought. (Note: Because convenience sampling was utilized and the study was conducted at only one university, the results obtained in such studies may be generalized only to the population at large with great caution.)

V. FINDINGS

A total of 588 students completed the 27-item survey, which was administered by the researcher in a campus-based classroom setting. Just more than half of the respondents were female (54.4 percent, 320 total). A total of 263 (44.7 percent) were male; five respondents (.9 percent) did not indicate gender.

Regarding age, the majority of survey participants (84.2 percent, 495 total) were age 18-24. Sixty-four students (10.9 percent) were age 25-30 and 14 participants (2.4 percent) were age 31-37. Only four students (.7 percent) were age 38-44 and seven (1.2 percent) were age 45 or older. Four respondents did not report an age.

Regarding survey respondents' grade classifications, 142 were freshmen, 121 were sophomores, 147 were juniors and 169 were seniors at the time of the study. Four students reported they were "unsure" of their grade classification; five undergraduates did not respond to this question.

A. *Undergraduates' newspaper readership habits*

According to the survey results that focused on the frequency of newspaper readership, only 42 of 588 respondents said they utilized traditional print, or the newspaper, on a "Daily" basis as a news source. A total of 198 (33.7 percent) reported they consulted a newspaper for information on a "Weekly" basis and 119 (20.2 percent) said they read a newspaper at least "Monthly." Meanwhile, a collective total of 227 respondents (38.6 percent) indicated they "Rarely" or "Never" sought news via the traditional-print format.

B. *Web-based new readership among undergraduates*

Per the survey results on frequency of news consumption as it relates to Web-based news, 50 percent of respondents (294) said they "Daily" turned to Internet news sites for information. Some 171 undergrads (29.1 percent) indicated they utilized the Web for news "Weekly" and 69 respondents (11.7 percent) said they sought online news on a "Monthly" basis.

Collectively, 32 undergraduates (8.8 percent) reported they “Never” utilized the Internet to seek news.

C. Types of news sought

According to this study’s findings, the majority of students surveyed—70.2 percent— indicated “Local/ State News” was the No. 1 type of news sought when they turned to media for news information. The quest for “National News” was the No. 2-ranked type of news sought by respondents, with “Traffic/Weather” reports listed as the next most-commonly sought type of news. Table 1 illustrates the response breakdown, by news category, for this question.

Type of News Sought	No. of Students	Percentages
State/Local News	413	70.2%
National News	72	12.2%
Traffic/Weather Reports	52	8.8%
Entertainment News	32	5.4
Business/Stock Info	2	.3%
Comics/Horoscopes	2	.3%
Classified/Retail Ads	2	.3%
Other News	12	2.0%
Non-reporting	1	.2%
Total	588	100%

TABLE 1: Types of News Sought by Undergraduates

Note. International News is included in the “Other News” category on this table.

D. Preferred online news sites

According to the survey data collected, CNN (www.cnn.com) was the most popular site for news. The No. 2-ranked site for Web-based news was MSNBC (www.msn.com) and Fox News (www.foxnews.com) was ranked third among respondents as a top online-news outlet. Beyond these top-three sites, students reported a number of preferred sites for online news. The Web-based news sources cited most frequently by the survey pool are contained in Table 2.

Online News Sites	No. of Students	Percentages
<i>CNN</i>	132	22.4%
<i>MSNBC</i>	84	14.3%
<i>Fox News</i>	43	7.3%

<i>BBC</i>	27	4.6%
<i>Natl. Public Radio</i>	10	1.7%
<i>The Tennessean</i>	10	1.7%
<i>C-SPAN</i>	2	.3%
<i>Bluwirenews.com</i>	2	.3%
Misc. Sites	109	18.5%
Non-reporting	169	28.7%
Total	588	100%

TABLE 2: Undergraduates’ Preferred Online News Sites

E. Focus Group Findings

To answer this study’s questions related to media convergence and obtain students’ views about the credibility of online news, 18 students were polled during focus group sessions. Each of these study participants completed the initial survey, and then volunteered to take part in subsequent focus groups. In turn, Table 3 provides an overview of the undergraduates who responded to this portion of the study’s research questions.

Name	Age (years)	Grade
Jeremy	24	Junior
Tim	23	Senior
Suzanne	37	Senior
Lacey	22	Senior
Mark	20	Junior
Alexander	23	Senior
Emily	21	Senior
Mary	24	Junior
Aaron	28	Senior
Michael	22	Senior
Rhonda	35	Junior
Megan	21	Senior
James	20	Junior
Jessica	22	Senior
Richard	23	Senior
Josh	20	Sophomore
David	28	Sophomore
Gina	52	Senior

TABLE 3: Overview of Focus Group Participants

Note. A total of 18 students participated in the focus groups.

F. Students' views on credible Web-based news sites

During the focus groups, several students, when interviewed about which websites contained the most credible news reports, provided general viewpoints about credibility as it relates to news versus identifying specific news outlets. The following is a sampling of their responses.

Emily: In this day and age, credible is hard to find. ... I seek a variety of [news] sources in hopes that, between them, I can figure out what actually happened.

Suzanne: Credible sources are few and far between. Credible, to me, is as close to a first-hand account as possible, and unbiased.

Michael: Credible sources are those ... that have proven themselves through many years of [news] coverage. Websites that end in ".org" or ".edu" are also typically credible.

James: Credibility is a huge deal—especially online. Anyone can post anything, so I have to make sure I'm getting the information from a source that is usually very unbiased and correct on their reports.

David: Actually, I have a hard time with most news that I read. I feel there is always bias one way or another, and I find it difficult to trust what I read in the news. When it comes to credibility, I find that local news media to have an advantage simply because the events that are covered are far less significant than those listed on the major news sites.

Jessica: Credible sources, for me, are the news websites [that are] television and newspaper sites. The people that run these sites are trained in reporting, so to me they are trustworthy.

Mark: I believe that news sources, including TV, focus on events that will make ratings go up rather than on news that is really important. For example, the Tiger Woods sex scandal will bring in a larger ... audience than health-care issues will. This leaves me with a pessimistic outlook on news sources, whether credible or not.

Richard: Credible news sources, such as CNN, MSNBC and Fox News, always seem to have the biggest reach. What I mean by that is they always seem to be the first places to break the most current news. However, each organization puts its own spin on the way the news is presented, so at times the only way to have any idea [about] what's really going on is [to] check as many news sources as you possibly can over the course of a couple of days.

The only problem with news sources like this is that, while they do report on things that actually matter, from time to time they will get stuck in a celebrity rut. I personally don't care about things like the Tiger Woods scandal, and I don't feel like anyone else should, either.

G. Undergraduates' preferred websites for 'trustworthy' news

Some focus group participants—when interviewed further and asked to be more specific in naming credible news sites—clearly identified particular Internet sources as being trustworthy news sources. Moreover, a number of research participants shared their views concerning why these news outlets were their preferred news sources. A sampling of their responses follows.

Rhonda: I use the Associated Press website, because they have the most up-to-date news and, after all, we as Americans we all want the latest [news].

Alexander: I usually watch CNN or MSNBC every morning ... but go to The New York Times' site for online news [because] it's easy to navigate.

Megan: I mainly go to The New York Times site, but also visit CNN and The Los Angeles Times [online]. They generally have the information I am looking for and seem reliable to me. I like their Web layouts better [than other news sites] because they're easy to navigate.

Emily: I read online newspapers such as The New York Times and local papers. ... I pick these papers up in print forms occasionally, but the online versions are much easier to access from anywhere. ... I also read news at the CNN and Fox News sites.

I love the literary quality of the stories written for The New York Times. Most of them read like feature stories, even when they are hard-news stories. I read local papers, because it's important to know what's going on in one's own community. I check out the broadcast companies because they always have interesting and usually controversial things to say.

Aaron: I would say I get 50 percent of my news online, local and national news, and 30 percent from print [sources] and 20 percent from radio, NPR (National Public Radio).

Mary: I get the majority of my news online and from traditional newspapers ... so I can know what's happening around the world.

Michael: With free access to local, regional and national publications on ... campus, I get a small portion of my news from [traditional] print. The majority of my news comes through the Internet [since] it's basically a one-stop-shop for all things communication. ...

Jessica: I like Yahoo! News, local newspaper websites, and one television news site, Fox News. I feel like these news sites are reliable sources of information.

Richard: A majority of my news comes from online sources or online versions of cable [news] sources. ...

Josh: Online is where I get my news mostly. It is usually easier to access news on the Internet, because it will always be there no matter what time it is. When I seek news, I usually go to The New York Times. It's one of the first places that come

to mind when I want news, and I have a subscription [to the newspaper's website].

Lacey: I get most of my news from the Internet. I rarely watch TV and I never listen to the radio. ...

David: I get the majority of my news online. For local news, I read The Tennessean online; for national news, CNN.com and The Drudge Report (www.drudgereport.com). ... I like CNN but only because I feel like the other major news networks don't have the user-friendly layout that CNN has.

Tim: I prefer to get news from a traditional newspaper, but in actuality, I probably get more news from online. Right now, there aren't any particular sites for news that come to mind, except Fox News. I mean, I'm not going to lie, I'm conservative, so I tend to like their reporting better. ...

Gina: My use of television and online [news sources] would run a close 1-2. Online, I look to The New York Times, CNN.com, MSNBC.com, The Christian Science Monitor and ESPN.com because frequent updates are easily accessed [on these sites] from work or home.

H. Frequency of media convergence

Although several focus group respondents reported they generally did not actively engage in media convergence, such as viewing slide shows or listening to podcasts that accompanied an online story, as part of their Web-based news consumption, a significant number of students indicated the interactive features often associated with online news and media convergence were indeed appealing to them.

In fact, 10 of the 17 students who actively discussed this question reported that, overall, these "hands-on" features caused the Internet news experience to be "more appealing," in addition to making Web-based news "more relatable," among other positives. Thus, such feedback suggests the majority of undergraduates surveyed are, in fact, engaged in media convergence during their online-news consumption. The following are among the students' comments surrounding media convergence.

David: I don't engage in media convergence on national or local news often, but I find that I do interact far more with local sports news.

Josh: I usually tend to read stories and move on unless whatever media convergence available can offer more detail about a story I'm interested in.

Gina: I read some blogs and reader postings on websites. However, much [of the] postings by nonprofessionals is dripping with venom and frequently adds nothing but obscenity to the discussion. Therefore, I do not take postings by readers very seriously and do not desire to waste time responding to their online drivel.

Megan: I read the text, watch videos and look at pictures but hardly listen to anything online that's audio only, like podcasts.

James: I'm a huge advocate of media convergence. I'm very interactive with news online by commenting and reposting [news stories] for others to find.

Emily: I don't think I'm interactive at all. I read stories and then move on. I never comment or blog on those stories. I will talk about them with friends, but not usually online. ... Just reading about the tragedy in Haiti has brought me to tears a couple times, so I don't want to see the trauma [via video or photos online] as well.

Richard: I generally don't interact with online media sources because I don't like the anonymity of it. It's really hard to have a serious conversation or a full-fledged debate about health-care reform or global warming with someone who goes by the name "JennyCat33" or "SkudTheStud." I prefer face-to-face interactions. That's also why I tend to avoid posting on blogs, too.

Lacey: I am not very interactive with online news. As far as media convergence goes, I don't really view the videos that go along with a story because I would rather read an article than watch a video.

Tim: I think if the story really interested me, I might try to [utilize media convergence] more, but I really just read the stories.

Michael: Mostly, yes, I do engage in media convergence. I explore how advanced sites are with multimedia. The New York Times has, in my opinion, the best multimedia [such as] videography, audio and picture presentations, et cetera, of all the American news sites I've explored.

VI. DISCUSSION

In a technology-driven media environment, journalism scholars and educators must make time to "stand back from the front line ... and develop perspective on the wider field [of contemporary journalism]" for the purposes of better defining journalism education and redesigning its curriculum to keep pace with today's media platforms. Although there is no guaranteed prescription for the perfect journalism curricula, its educators have a fundamental responsibility to review, evaluate and update how and what they teach so their students are adequately prepared to work in an information age where media convergence and journalistic cross-training is the norm.

In the early 20th century, French statesman, journalist and teacher Georges Clemenceau said, "War is much too serious a matter to be entrusted to the military." Similarly, in the early 21st century it may be said that "Convergence is too important to be left to practitioners." Educators, instead, must embrace these new technologies for the sake of their learners, as well as for the sake of journalism education's future. Otherwise, students will lack the necessary skills that are vital to the effective delivery of information that is at the core of a democratic society.

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AUTHORS PROFILE

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