

Educating Journalists for the 21st Century:
Constructing a Student Multimedia Environment

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Abstract

This paper is a case study of the multimedia/converged media newsroom at Abilene Christian University. The multimedia newsroom designer created a space in which students will be able to apply to student media products the theories and praxes they are discussing in the traditional classroom. Just as many professional news organizations move toward more converged environments, media educators must provide opportunities for students to learn in such environments. Through an exploration of constructivist learning theory and professional industry standards, the designer of the multimedia newsroom at Abilene Christian University gained an understanding of cognitive development and how it relates to learning, as well as professional practices and expectations for graduates. The multimedia newsroom comprises the print, broadcast and online student media products. Each of the products is a part of the whole -- each providing its unique advantages to the coverage of a story. Students produce media in an environment that cultivates collaboration between faculty and students and among peers in a technologically advanced facility. The goal of the multimedia newsroom is to provide student learning opportunities in a progressive media environment that is functional, attractive and supports the curriculum. Since its opening in January 2008, the new facility has fostered understanding and respect among the staffs of different student media outlets and created a synergistic learning environment by providing opportunities for students to observe and participate in each other's processes.

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The face of journalism has evolved continuously since the invention of moveable type in the West by Johannes Gutenberg circa 1450. With the introduction of each new medium, mild chaos has ensued. The current media trend mixes the traditional with the online in a recipe for media convergence.

Role of news media in U.S. culture

Advances in technology – from print to radio waves to digital cable, from desktop publishing to Internet Web sites – have given the average citizen the ability to independently learn far more than the historic village sage could have imagined. Americans have embraced the freedom to learn from a variety of sources and to create knowledge from a wealth of information. Peoples around the world enjoy similar freedoms to varying extents; however, this study focuses on American students' use of free-flowing ideas. Traditionally, people have made most of their decisions by using the information they gather from traditional national, regional and local news media. A study by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press showed that the news media's influence might be waning. In June 2005, the study showed that 49% of Americans believed that the news media's influence was growing compared to 36% who said they believed it was declining; two years prior in July 2003, those numbers were 55% and 29%, respectively (Pew Research Center). In the same study, 24% of Americans listed the Internet as a main source of news, and 23% said they go online for news everyday. Meanwhile 45% of Americans surveyed didn't know whether or not Internet news blogs

were fact or opinion; of those respondents who answered, 20% said blogs were mostly fact and 32% said they were mostly opinion (Pew Research Center, 2005). However, in their commentary on the 2005 Pew study, Rosenstiel and Kovach (2005) wrote, “Even though people like the on-demand nature of the web, the vast majority still responds to the agenda-setting influence of editors and reporters signaling to them what are the most important stories of the day” (p. 1). With the freedom to read, listen, watch, test truths and arrive at opinions, comes a dependence on the individuals who gather and report the information – the journalists. Downie and Kaiser (2002) state,

Journalists have a special role in preserving one of America’s greatest assets, our culture of accountability...Americans in positions of power generally assume that someday they may have to account for how they have used their power...Good journalism is a principal source of the information necessary to make such accountability meaningful. (p. 8)

Mass communication outlets have grown from print to include radio, network television, cable television and the Internet. None of these transitions was easy for professionals in the field – even the telephone, now an indispensable tool of journalists, was initially regarded as a scourge that discouraged journalistic legwork and would decrease the quality of reporting (Shafer, 1998). The advent of radio was shaky until a new firm called the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) was created to shore up the industry, creating the first nationwide radio network in 1926 (Skornia & Kitson, 1968). In the middle of the 20th century, television was seen as primarily an entertainment medium, but news division executives also saw its potential as a carrier of information. John Day, then news director for CBS, said, “Electronic journalism must hew a path through the

jungle if it is to achieve a goal of adding something to human knowledge,” (Skornia & Kitson, 1968, p. 316). The path was still being hewn 50 years later as television news, with which consumers were very familiar, was still trying to find its place in the journalistic mix, and still dealing with its entertainment-based roots. Dan Bradley news director of Tampa’s WFLA said in 2000, “TV news is still young, really just coming into its adolescence or teen-hood now” (Downie & Kaiser, 2002, p.186).

Recent changes in the news media

In the late 1990s the far-reaching effects of the Internet were being observed in the news media and media professionals were focused on discovering how journalists would create stories in this new arena. Most online sites began as “shovelware,” which was the reusing of information already provided on TV or in the newspaper (Colon, 2000). However, many sites have now moved past the initial stages into presenting original or additional content. Calling on McLuhan’s notion that a bomber pilot is totally detached from the disruption and rearrangement of lives caused by his bombs, Cooper (1999) surmises, “creators of technologies have little awareness of how their inventions are the catalyst for social, cultural, political, and economic changes” (p. 71). Dr. Vladimir Zworykin, who invented or developed the components necessary to make television function, thought TV would be used not just as entertainment, but to extend “human sight to places where not every man can go” (Skornia & Kitson, 1968, p. 315). As the inventors of the Internet and World Wide Web cast visions for the future, they spoke of communicating, researching, even shopping using hypertext, but they did not talk much about the effects those tools would have on the news media (Brand, 2001). For example

Paul Baran, who invented packet switching, an essential element of the Internet, knew the effects of a worldwide network of computers would be tremendous. Baran stated

The number of users was very small [at first], but the rate of increase made it obvious what was going to happen. It was just a matter of time. No one is ever as shocked and surprised as when the inevitable occurs. (Brand, 2001, p.2)

Because the Web offers a large audience and the opportunity for images, video, audio and text, all types of media outlets have taken their journalism to the Web. With the emergence of the Web as a tool for disseminating information and the increased value society puts on having instant-access, converged media are the norm. Indeed, with the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, the traditional media are coexisting in the online environment with individuals who are writing and videoing more and more information each day. The media long have been responding to these consumer demands for multiple media channel distribution, and they are adjusting to the influx of popular consumer-created material available online. In traditional media, “the idea now is to conceive the stories from the beginning based on how you will distribute them” (Shepard, 2000, p. 23).

JMC@ACU

Abilene Christian University is an independent university consistently ranked in the top quarter of regional, master’s-granting universities by *U.S. News and World Report* and it is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. This nearly 5,000-student university is located in Abilene, Texas, population 110,000. Students at the

university come from all 50 United States and more than 60 nations worldwide. The university employs about 250 faculty members and 425 staff members. About 275 students major and minor in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication. The department is nationally accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education for Journalism and Mass Communications.

Journalism's role at Abilene Christian University began when the first issue of the *Optimist*, the student newspaper, was published in 1912. In 1916, a yearbook, the *Prickly Pear*, was added. The curricular and co-curricular personifications of the discipline have exerted significant influence on the campus through its 101-year history. The program grew from a few classes in the English Department in 1923 to a minor in 1950. After several years as a major in the Department of Speech and then the Department of Communication, the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication was founded in 1987. The \$4.5 million Don H. Morris Center was built in 1978 and was equipped with state-of-the-art computer and broadcasting equipment. It became the first single-site home of the program, which had previously been housed in a variety of buildings around campus. In the 20 years since becoming its own department, JMC has bloomed into a program with eight full-time faculty positions. The facilities have been housed on two floors of the Morris Center, and include a National Public Radio station, a low-power television station, three computer labs, one traditional classroom, faculty offices, a yearbook office and a newspaper office.

The university's newspaper and yearbook have been considered curricular and co-curricular lab activities for the students in the department's journalism and electronic media programs. Students taking journalism courses are assigned stories from the newspaper managing editor, and students majoring in journalism are required to work as a staff member of the newspaper or yearbook for at least two semesters. Student announcers staff the NPR station and students produce several shows for local broadcast

on the television station. Students in each of the student media are highly successful in state and national competitions, even when competing against students from much larger programs. In 2001, the twice-weekly student newspaper added its Web version, which has evolved into a multimedia Website with written stories, videos and photo essays. More recently, the yearbook added a DVD component to complement the print edition of the book. Throughout these developments, “the foundations of the teaching and practice of the majors offered in this department can be identified in theology, philosophy, First Amendment theory, controls of information theory and ethics” (JMC Department, 2000, p. 24). Edmund Lambeth identified the common ideals in today’s media and related fields as truth telling, justice, freedom, humaneness and stewardship (1986). Graduates of this program are entering the Marketplace of Ideas, influencing communities toward high ethical values in media, agencies and non-profit organizations. In the JMC program, students are challenged, through theoretic and practical approaches, to “master critical thinking, critical writing, critical problem-solving and principled use of the digital tools of the 21st century” (JMC Department, 2000, p. 25). The leadership of the journalism and mass communication department and the university consistently have been committed to change – particularly technological change – intent to keep up with the marketplace into which the graduates are going. The faculty has been encouraged to keep the spirit of change; the department has not been allowed to suffocate under dusty printed newspapers or drown in photographic wet lab chemicals. It is technologically advanced and primed for a change in the design of its learning environment.

Toward a Progressive Curriculum through the Building of Community

Although the department was committed to staying technologically current and the program had turned out hundreds of successful mass communicators, the curriculum

had reached the end of its course as an effective model for teaching and learning by 1996. Each course existed independently of the others. Because faculty members did not discuss course content much, overlap was common, and building on perceived past learning was based on guesswork. Clearly the department does not consist of one community, rather many communities with similar goals and different practices. These communities overlapped one another in a Venn diagram fashion. Within one community the faculty were learning to be faculty members; in others the students were learning to be students of their individual majors; in still others faculty and students were learning the art and craft of major-specific mass communication. During the time the media marketplace functioned in a similar manner, this model was useful for the education and preparation of people to work in it. Technological advances, including the Internet, World Wide Web and wireless technologies, along with rumors of deregulation from the Federal Communications Commission, encouraged a phenomenon known as media convergence. The public desire for real-time and just-in-time access to information drove media corporations to partner with each other to provide news through multiple outlets within the print, broadcast and Internet media. The faculty of the department knew convergence would cause a change in the types of skills graduates of the JMC department would need to land a first job and have career-long success.

The faculty made the first convergence-based revision to the curriculum in 1996, ensuring that all majors learned skills in writing, photography and videography, publication design, Web publishing or interactive media, and communication law. With this broad range of skills and knowledge in hand, students were able to edge out singly-skilled competitors for jobs in the marketplace. In 2002 further steps were taken to

refresh the curriculum to fit into a converged media model in preparation for building the JMC Network. First, the print journalism major, broadcast journalism major and photojournalism major were combined into a journalism major with tracks in print, broadcast and photo. While the curricular changes in these areas were minimal, this change created a different mindset in the students; no longer were print journalism majors and broadcast journalism majors competing with each other. Now they could work together more readily. Second, the Electronic Media major broke into two tracks: visual communication, which focuses on photography and video, and digital media, which focuses on Web publishing. This change allows students to choose between working with a camera primarily or with interactive media. All students in the department have basic knowledge of these media types. The new courses added to the Electronic Media major were Writing for Electronic Delivery, a Web writing course, and Advanced Digital Media, a second-level Web publishing course. Faculty noted Electronic Media majors in their zeal for pictures and interactivity were less skilled in writing, so the Writing For Electronic Delivery class was designed specifically for the needs of the visual communication and digital media students. The course focuses specifically on writing for online consumption as well as media ethics. It is a popular elective with Ad/PR students. Advanced Digital Media is an active study of Web publishing techniques and software, leadership in technical environments and information architecture. Finally the core curriculum shared by all majors was modified by combining the frequently overlapping first-level courses in videography and photography into a course called Introduction to Visual Media. This course introduces all JMC students to theories of photography and

videography, communicating with images, as well as photo editing software and video editing software.

Learning Theory's role in the Remodel

Once the curriculum was in place to support the pedagogical changes within the department, the faculty turned its attention to building the JMC Network. The JMC Network, a combination of all the student media, is built on grounded constructivist theories. Within this context, individual students will construct meaning based on their experiences and evolved beliefs. Based on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which is defined as the gap between the problem solving ability of individuals versus the problem solving ability of an individual in collaboration with more capable individuals (1978), constructivist theories purport that learning is strongly affected by social interaction and shared problem solving. The theory of Communities of Practice, as written by Lave and Wenger, says that people learn best in communities where they begin as peripheral participants, then advance to full participation as their expertise grows (1991). "Becoming a full participant certainly includes engaging with the technologies of everyday practice, as well as participating in the social relations, production processes and other activities of communities of practice. Participation involving technology is especially significant because the artifacts used within a cultural practice carry a substantial portion of that practice's heritage" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 101). In this context, students will interact socially both face-to-face and online with other students and faculty members, as well as with the technologies required to generate media products. The university's student media, which will be housed in the newly completed multimedia newsroom, consist of a newspaper, a television station, a National Public

Radio affiliate station, a multimedia yearbook and a Web-based news product. Students will create media packages that include stories in a variety of forms. The faculty advisers and students will decide which media outlets best fit any particular story. For example, perhaps a story about the university budget is best communicated using a print and electronic written version and a radio version, whereas a story about a student-led volunteer project may be best told in video format. All of the majors will work together in the space – hearing each other’s conversations and learning from each other the intricacies of their crafts. Propelling the idea of situated learning, Brown and Duguid (2000) state, “If the people are engaged in different practices, if they are learning to be different kinds of people, then they will respond to the information in different ways...Practice, then, both shapes and supports learning.” (p. 129).

The challenge put before the faculty was to create a rich context in which student experiences lead to knowledge and skill. “Participation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. This implies that understanding and experience are in constant interaction – indeed are mutually constitutive” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 51). Faculty will not simply talk about the ideas of media convergence in their classes, rather students will work and learn in an environment of convergence – collaborating with students who are creating stories for a variety of media outlets. “For newcomers then the purpose is not to learn *from* talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn *to* talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 109). No longer will the student media be sequestered based on type of output. Students will learn the jargon and the practice of multiple types of media outlets, and although they may still specialize in one or two types

of media, students will be at least peripheral participants in all of the student media outlets of the university. Because of student interactions with faculty, other students and technology, this context provides opportunity for support, or scaffolding, which allows complex ideas to seem more manageable without simplifying them (Glaser, 1990, Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers and students will work within contexts that are authentic, as defined by Strobel (2005). Strobel's Dimensions of Authenticity (2005) are:

- Context authenticity – context resembles a real-world context
- Task authenticity – activities resemble real-world activities
- Impact authenticity – products are used in out-of school situations
- Personal authenticity – projects are near students' own lives
- Value authenticity – projects satisfy personal or community needs.

The creation of the JMC Network gives students a real-world environment in which to create media that will tell stories in a variety of formats to a worldwide audience. These stories are relevant to the students and allow audiences to be more informed regarding campus news.

Renovating the building

Just as many professional news organizations move toward more converged environments, media educators must provide opportunities for students to learn in such an environment. When newspapers transitioned from paste-up to computer-based layout, JMC@ACU upgraded its equipment and curriculum to prepare students to work in that environment. Similarly in early 2007 the department received the final grant to fund the \$1.2 million renovation that created the space for the multimedia/converged media

newsroom, dubbed *JMC Network*. It will comprise print, broadcast and online products. Students will work for the Network both curricularly, through their courses, and co-curricularly. Ideally, the products will each be a part of the whole – each providing its unique advantages to the coverage of a story. In addition to fostering understanding and respect among the different media within the department, providing opportunities for students to see and participate in each other's processes will create a more synergistic environment. As the student media continue to evolve, plans are developing to integrate Web 2.0 technologies into them, using the JMC Network website as a campus hub for the sharing of consumer-created media. Engaging the consumer-creator in campus media adds a new crop of participants in the student media community of practice, thus enriching the entire community's learning experience.

When the home of JMC@ACU, the Morris Center, was built in 1978, the equipment costs for the first and third floors were about \$325,000. In 1986 the radio operation was upgraded with a \$300,000 grant from the Public Telecommunications and Facilities Program. In 1990, the first of the Macintosh labs were installed at a cost of about \$350,000. Since then the department has replaced and upgraded the equipment, hardware and software several times, and added two more computer labs. The 2007 renovation is the first major facilities renovation for the building. At the conclusion of the renovation, all areas of the building have wireless connections to the Internet. The elements of the second floor include the JMC Network: three student editor offices; a podcasting studio; common student media work areas with four hard-wired video editing stations; one photo editing station; two page layout workstations and multiple laptop-ready desks; a mini video production set, complete with green screen; a student

conference room and a break and lounge area. The 6-person video editing lab on the first floor is networked to ease the sharing of media created there with the student media outlets. The third floor features one 65-person smart classroom; two 15-student computer labs; a faculty commons; departmental reading and media room; academic adviser's office; departmental administrative office; nine faculty offices and a student advertising and public relations agency office. The first floor is largely unchanged, housing the NPR station, television station and a 40-person smart classroom.

Expected outcomes

The creation of the JMC Network differs from previous replacements and upgrades because it will change the way the media products are created. It will change the process and give students the opportunity to learn in a converged media atmosphere. In *Shaking up the Schoolhouse*, Schlecty wrote "Two things sustain change: one is a leader...[who] acts as a change agent; the other is a system or group of systems that supports the change" (2001, p. 40). In addition to the creation of new common newsroom, the department plans to build a customized content management system using the database system Xythos. This CMS will allow student media creators to share stories in all formats through an integrative database system. The renovation also will create an environment in which the faculty will be able more easily to communicate and collaborate. Although previously faculty offices were spread among as many as three floors of the building, in the renovated building all faculty offices are on one floor and a faculty commons area will now exist, complete with an inviting glass wall that looks out onto the main corridor.

By creating a space in which these authentic interactions and constructions can take place and a culture that values full-participants, the level of participation in all of the communities of practice in the JMC department should increase. Participation in a community of practice is an investment. Fully participating members of functional communities of practice use many hours to develop relationships, discuss issues and reify knowledge. In addition to helping “newbies” enter the fold, a full participant gains knowledge by engaging fully in the community; that individual invests in himself or herself, the practice and the community. As his or her understanding grows so does that of the community. “Become a member of a community, engage in its practices, and you can acquire and make use of its knowledge and information. Remain an outsider, and these will remain indigestible.” (Brown and Duguid, 2000, p.126)

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