Teaching journalistic practice in a convergent media age: innovations and issues

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Abstract:

In teaching journalistic practice in the higher education sector, practitioners are increasingly encouraged to highlight the profession’s transition to a convergent media age. But what does this actually mean in practice? Looking at both the theoretical and practical development of the new post-graduate journalism units at Swinburne University as a case study, this paper aims to compare the traditionally print-based forms of journalistic pedagogy with ‘new media’ innovations. In doing so, this paper critically discusses new approaches to journalistic pedagogy, and their consequences for the identity and direction of the profession.

Introduction

At the beginning of the year, Swinburne University in Melbourne finally unveiled their new-look media department. Responding to burgeoning student interest in professional communication, media studies and journalism, the department was completed with a technological focus on ‘new’ media practice. A “digital newsroom” housing the latest Apple editing suites was built. In large computer laboratories, Alienware computers now sit glowing like hotted up Buicks. Most importantly, curriculum revision for the whole program completed the extreme makeover of the department. The use of these technologies incorporated a switch in pedagogical focus; not content with press releases and the inverted pyramid, Swinburne now espouses the need for students to record, edit, compose and distribute multimedia content to be successful media graduates.

As a journalism lecturer, the re-development of the content especially has allowed me to critically compare traditionally print-based forms of journalistic pedagogy to ‘new media innovations’. This paper uses the technological and content revision of Swinburne University’s media department as a case study to examine wider issues in pedagogical approaches to journalistic practice. I argue that technological best practice does not always ensure best reportorial practice. What also needs to evolve in pedagogical approach is the changes that are occurring in reporting style with the onslaught of online and multimedia technologies. While an enormous amount of academic work has discussed the comparison of traditional and new media practices in journalism, arguably journalistic pedagogy faces many issues in developing these approaches for the purposes of training students. Thus, this paper critically discusses new approaches to journalistic pedagogy, and their consequences for traditional formats of teaching news structure, news values and investigation.
New theoretical approaches to the role of the journalist

I always begin a new semester of teaching journalism skills by asking the students how many actually want to be journalists. One would assume that the majority have thought about journalism as a career. In fact, it is usually just over a third of the class that raises their hand. This is not unusual. Speaking from personal experience, many journalism educators are finding that students choose journalism subjects—or even change into journalism degrees—without actually wanting to begin a career as a journalist. These students have a much broader view of the industry itself, where journalism skills are seen to be important in a wide array of potential media careers. This approach to journalism by students seems to be a consequence of changing cultural understanding of the role of journalism in a convergent media age. The use of increasingly interactive, networked online modes of communication has affected journalistic practice in regard to both its definition as a profession and its practice. In this context, some academics have enquired whether journalism itself is obsolete: “As the technology takes over the role of mediation with software such as search engines and content filters, are the mediators still required?” (Hall, 2001: 3). This comment is as much about the structure of news distribution as it is about the cultural understanding of the journalist’s role.

It has certainly become abundantly clear that interactivity within online forms of communication have made the top-down publishing and business models of traditional media increasingly redundant. For example, The Australian Financial Review has been suffering audience losses in comparison to online financial news media such as Business Spectator. The business model that has sustained print media companies for more than 150 years — advertising revenue underwriting the expense of producing journalism—is under threat from the rapid rise of online media (Web revolution, 2007). The advertising revenue that has sustained print media companies is now being increasingly taken by online companies that deliver free content, as in the Business Spectator model, or by companies like Seek.com that contribute nothing to journalism. While print organisations like the The Age or The Australian Financial Review attempt to compete by using subscription system to access its online content, the ‘walled garden’ approach to information has failed online. Business Spectator, in less than a year, has already eclipsed The Australian Financial Review in terms of online eyes (Oderberg, 2008). Few people are willing to pay for online media because they will be able to find what they want for free elsewhere on the web. This has affects on both the structure of distribution of news, but also the informative role of the journalist.

While the oft-prophesised demise of the newspaper has not yet been realised, increasingly communication has moved to cheaper online formats, leading to changes in the constitution of traditional journalistic practice. The cultural contract between the journalist and the reader has changed; where journalists were once the privileged arbiters of news, audiences now demand equality—they too, are able to not only find, but create their own news. In traditional journalism textbooks, the central role of the journalist has been described through the ability to discover and publish information that extinguishes rumour and speculation (Randall, 1996: 2). The conventions of this process suggest that
only the journalist is able to find the people and the information to perform this role. This information is published in a specific narrative form, where the journalist acts as the privileged ‘gatewatcher’ of this information, filtering information through a supposedly fact-based and objective lens. As Hall (2001: 5) suggests however, online journalism relinquishes these traditional roles. Instead the interactivity and democratisation of information online allows the traditional ‘audience’ to act as a “guide and commentator” to sources of information: “As readers become their own story tellers the role of ‘gatekeeper’ is largely passed from the journalist to them”.

What do these changes mean to the pedagogical approach to journalism? Most pedagogical approaches to journalism have long incorporated theoretical discussion of the changing role of the journalist, and emerging trends with the introduction of new technologies. Swinburne University’s media department has emphasised teaching journalism within a theoretical framework of convergent media models and practices. Perhaps the more pertinent issue however, is that of engaging continually changing and newly emerging media techniques into practical teaching methods.

Teaching students traditional news values, writing structure and modes of investigation raise important issues of how to best prepare students to adapt to continually changing media contexts. Increasingly we have taught students that they need to be ‘multimedia superstars’ to compete for increasingly online journalism and communication roles. But is this really the case? Despite Business Spectator’s success in gaining eyeballs, can it also be a profitable business that employs graduates? One of the principals in Business Spectator is Eric Beecher, who also part-owns another one of Australia’s most popular and influential independent news websites, Crikey. The ‘Crikey Model’, a muck-raking news reporting style, coupled with an email subscription base, is considered one of the most successful independent online news systems in Australia. Nonetheless, Crikey’s founder Stephen Mayne has said that Crikey does not yet turn a profit (Mayne, 2008). This suggests that graduates may not actually be able to find paid or full-time work within online or independent media.

This is a particular issue informing many of the decisions made by staff in the Swinburne media department in terms of ‘best practice’ skills sets to teach journalism students. The structure of distribution and publication of journalism in future affects pedagogy because it directs the kinds of skills that students might need. Do journalists simply need reporting skills and the ability to be a news hound to find a story? Or will budding journalists find that lack of work in online and traditional media industries in Australia means their first jobs will not actually be based in journalism at all? This certainly seems to be the case, judging from anecdotal evidence attributed to recent graduate experience. We want media graduates to find jobs. Most of Swinburne’s media curriculum development decisions have thus incorporated the necessity of training journalism graduates who can write and find a story, but also edit and produce multimedia for work in related media fields. These decisions have been made by comparing traditional pedagogical approaches to journalism, that often simply skill journalists to write a story for a newspaper. Nonetheless, in Swinburne’s curricular comparison between traditional and new media journalism pedagogy, we have not always replaced those traditional forms. I will now
outline some of the decisions made by Swinburne staff in developing pedagogical content in regard to news writing, news values and investigative skills, explaining the rationale in the context of wider developments in global journalistic practice.

**Teaching news writing structure then and now:**

What is particularly striking in a comparative analysis of journalism pedagogy is the speed of change in what were once considered fundamental skills. This has become especially apparent in revising the content for the news-writing segment of the journalism subjects taught at Swinburne. Traditionally, teaching journalism students the ‘inverted pyramid’ structure of news writing has been a stalwart pedagogical necessity within most universities. Students are taught that the most common forms of news writing begin with hard news written in the inverted pyramid structure. The ‘lead’ tells the most important newsworthy fact without any creative adornment, while the inverted pyramid structure continues the story by filtering facts in descending order of importance.

The inverted pyramid structure was constructed out of necessity associated with print technology. If a news story was too long for its allocated space in the daily newspaper, a news editor wanted to be able to cut the newspaper at any point without affecting understanding of the story. Similarly, the lead was meant to ‘get straight to the point’ so that journalists sending stories from the field via telegraph did not waste words or money developing the story. The modern newspaper is said to have adapted the structure as a service to its time-poor readership. A short lead and inverted pyramid structure is shown to assist ‘scanning’ readers understand the news story without having to read the entire article. Most traditional journalism textbooks espouse the discipline and need for hard news and the inverted pyramid structure. Stovall (204: 157) suggests that “putting the most important information at the top allows a reader to decide quickly whether or not to stick with the story”. Australian icon of journalism studies, Sally White (1996: 176) is much more nostalgic about the form, suggesting that hard news is “the backbone of the newspaper or news bulletin. It is the justification of journalism”.

While this structure has often been taught as the basic writing skill for general reporters, its actual use in various mediums appears to be declining. This has occurred especially in print, because the emergence of broadcast and internet technologies has made ‘breaking news’ in newspapers almost redundant. The inverted pyramid style is ineffective in these circumstances because the immediate news has been covered in the 24 hours before print production schedules have a chance to compete. The effect is that newspapers often adopt a soft news or feature approach, optimising analysis and opinion in print, whilst online counterparts take on breaking news. Uko’s (2008) analysis of news writing in print and online forms has also illustrated this change. Where most newspapers could not compete with their online counterparts in terms of timeliness of reportage, his analysis showed that most next day print reports were often written in a feature-style analysis:

From all the information gathered, the writer, drawing crucial and interesting information from observation, thorough research and careful interviewing, determines the approach. That is why journalism scholars maintain that good writing comes from good reporting. A story will have an arresting lead if the reporter sought those rare
and interesting bits of information that illuminate life, occurrences and personalities.

What Uko’s analysis suggests is that experienced journalists are able to circumvent online news production by using extra time to gather the interviews and observation that allows them to write an interesting feature.

While this process might work for journalists who have well-established investigative and writing skills, graduate journalists might struggle to both research and write a feature with their limited publishing experiences at university. Instead student journalists seem most keen to develop the blogger-style reporting they have been exposed to through their own observations of online news. Blogging as a distinct reportorial style has developed popularity since the September 11 attacks in New York and have been used successfully during the US-led invasion of Iraq (Bruns, 2005: 200). It incorporates an informal, personality-driven reporting style, often mingling fact with opinion. In an age where ‘compelling content is king’, securing an audience through the force of a blogger’s popularity seems to be a new media distribution trend. This has nothing to do with the size of the organisation behind the blogger; blog sites of individuals such as Perez Hilton are just as popular as blogs of columnists on some of the most popular mainstream newspapers. Mario Lavandeira, the creator of Perez Hilton, is believed to gain profits of around $US250,000 a year from his gossip blog (Hedgaarde, 2007).

Similarly, a raft of independent political and news analysis blog-style websites are now extremely popular, such as Indymedia, The Mayne Report, Web Diary and YouDecide. Blogs are very well suited to online interactivity because the repororial style maintains a flexible and somewhat egalitarian mode of exchange between user and blogger. The technology also allows interactive use of other bloggers’ writing by linking or quoting from other blog sites, or embedding user comment or audiovisual components. This mode of blogging has been used to great effect on The Guardian’s website, where the ‘blog central’ page allows journalists to blog on topics of interest, create videos and produce video ‘conversations’ with other users. This has allowed a reporting style that is formatted to appear like a distributed conversation on a very large scale without an overload of information on one site (Bruns, 2005: 202). The non-linear, discussion-based style of the blog can be seen to have been adopted in other forms of news writing, especially in the use of blogs by journalists in print and broadcast media.

While blogs have been adopted into theoretical discussion of the changing role of the journalist, the ‘blogger’ style as a form of journalistic writing often sits uncomfortably with journalism educators who teach the inverted pyramid style. There has been much debate over whether a blog can even be included in discussion of journalism practice. For example, Reynolds (in Bruns, 2005: 211) suggests: “although webloggers do actual reporting from time to time, most of what they bring to the table is opinion and analysis—punditry”. Most mainstream journalists espouse the need for ethical, legal and editorial responsibility to be engaged in a ‘profession’ of journalism. Debate continues as to whether there could be as much content on blogs without the provision of everyday print and broadcast ‘hard news’ journalism that has been re-purposed for comment by bloggers (See Lasica, 2003). This differs from discussion of grassroots or hyperlocal
journalism, which incorporates the interactivity of blogs within local journalistic production online.

These debates in contemporary news writing have translated into a somewhat conservative pedagogical approach to news writing at Swinburne University. In reviewing news writing practices, media staff have continued to teach hard news writing and the inverted pyramid style. This is justified by the fact that much of ‘blogger’ or ‘feature’ writing style that we have seen in everyday news has not translated into better, or more disciplined news writing. From the perspective of an educator, the inverted pyramid style of writing teaches students to write with precision, and to spend time constructing and editing their writing in a much more in-depth manner. It seems to be a disservice to not give students the hard news writing skills that will equip them with the economy and precision needed to write even the more detailed of feature pieces. Indeed, students often leave tutorials on hard news writing saying they felt ‘devastated’ when they realise that what they thought was beautiful prose, was actually grammatically incorrect, unintelligible verbosity. While it is formal, the inverted pyramid style teaches students writing discipline. Blogs are an important aspect of teaching—course notes, discussions, lectures and seminars are all posted on open source and content blog sites. Their value, however, as a pedagogical tool seems at this stage to be confined to an important tool of communication, rather than of writing itself.

**News Values: From impact to creative content**

Where news writing might naturally appear to change with the emergence of new media, the understanding of ‘news’ as a phenomenon has not often been discussed as a continually evolving aspect of journalism pedagogy. Almost every traditional textbook on journalistic practice espouses the need for students to understand the seven news values associated with finding a newsworthy story; timeliness, impact, proximity, prominence, currency, conflict, and human interest. These news values have often been treated as some kind of ‘holy grail’ for news-worthiness in a profession where finding ‘news’ has often relied on the gut instinct of the journalist themselves.

It seems, however that the onslaught of net users and contributors has meant that the seven traditional news values simply aren’t enough to make a news story ‘news-worthy’. Much discussion has now revolved around a much less ‘top-down’ approach to understanding news-worthiness; as much as journalists tell the audience what the news is, audiences can now make their own. Therefore in a web 2.0 world, where users are also makers, it is compelling content that rules, especially for mainstream media attempting to keep a loyal audience base. At a recent conference on directions in new media, Fairfax Media’s CEO, David Kirk argued that expanding a print company into a ‘multimedia content developer’ meant giving a lot more control to the audience to decide what is newsworthy (Kirk, 2008). Kirk (2008) commented that continued success would be measured in eyeballs, not advertising dollars.

In this context, it would appear that news-worthiness is encapsulating a much broader reach. Rather than the seven static understandings of news value in terms of events or
people, news value might also be measured in the amount and the type of interaction the story allows for audience members. The allure of reading a story might not just be the story itself, but its application to global trends, the links it provides to other sources, and the ways in which the story is told (in terms of print, audio and visual aspects). This means that competitiveness between news organizations is going to be based much more on who publishes content that is more ‘interesting’, compelling or original.

The Guardian’s Online editor and journalist, Kevin Anderson (2008) has suggested that news value no longer means a single journalist working to cover a single event and consequently handing down his observations as ‘news’ to the unknowing audience. Anderson (2008) makes his point by telling a story about investigating conditions in Iraq for US and British soldiers. Instead of telephoning the usual suspects—government agencies and journalists posted at the scene—Anderson posted a request on his blog using Seesmic. Seesmic is a communications technology that acts much like the video version of Twitter. Each user has their own page and can create videos directly from a webcam, publishing them to the site as well as other social networks. Users can follow or add ‘friends’ and have conversations via video. After posting his video, Anderson received responses from US soldiers in Iraq who ‘followed’ his video. The soldiers’ then ‘googled’ Anderson, decided that he was a trustworthy journalist and spoke to him in via Seesmic about what they were experiencing. Using cheap, networked technology, Anderson was able to circumvent traditional barriers to journalists reporting on wars and get frank, of-the-minute reports about the situation in Iraq from his office in London (Anderson, 2008). This was something that journalists on the scene in Iraq, plagued by military public relations were not able to do in a timely manner. Secondly, Anderson’s source was able to look up information about Anderson himself and decide how they might interact with him. The soldier decided that Anderson was trustworthy enough to allow him to impart more news-worthy information.

These changes in the value attributed to stories have proven to be somewhat of a conundrum for staff attempting to incorporate these changes into practical application for journalism students. Students tend not to have the networks or experience to anticipate a wider new-worthiness of their stories. Media staff at Swinburne have thus attempted to exploit the skills and networks that students have already cultivated to find news-worthy stories. In the post-graduate journalism subjects, the media department has negotiated a professional contract with a magazine. All of the feature stories produced by post-graduate students as part of their final assessment are published within the magazine over a six-month period. Students are then required to initiate, research and produce feature pieces collaboratively using both traditional journalistic practice such as interview, and new media practices such as holding news briefings via Skype and contributing to online niche forums to find interesting stories or people to interview.

Students completing journalism studies now already have the distinct advantage of being well-versed in online user-culture. They are of a generation that has adopted use of sites like Facebook, YouTube, MySpace and online chat spaces as everyday social interactions. Most students use these sites for pleasure, but they can also be utilised as networking and investigative tools for student journalists. Whereas most traditional journalists still have no inclination to use social networking as part of their investigative work, students know
how to access this sort of information. Often journalism educators themselves struggle to catch up with new media innovations, finding themselves a generation behind students who are already using social media creatively for their own benefit!

While traditional news values continue to be taught as part of the subject’s content, they are contextualised as elements needed to ‘tell’ the story. In terms of actually finding a ‘news-worthy’ story, the focus has been on exploiting personal interactions both online and locally, to find ‘compelling content’. To do this, students work collaboratively to gain different perspectives and applications of story ideas. Students are also encouraged to give up final ‘ownership’ of their work to everyone else in the class. During ‘news briefings’, students are encouraged to share information, issues and contacts they might have to contribute to each others’ stories. This has led to students gaining interviews through MSN chat connections, discussing media ethics with international journalists online and collaborating with not-for-profit organisations found through blogs. The use of online forms of interactivity has contributed a much richer experience of journalism than simply organising an interview with their local council representative.

This perspective is also linked to one of the major changes made in the Swinburne media department; the creation of a digital, networked news portal, utilising both student and user contributions to make a news publication. The media department are attempting to create a news space that allows students to use their practical skills as well as interact and collaborate with online users to continually perpetuate local and global news. This is also an attempt to reflect changes in journalistic reporting in a convergent media age. The ‘front end’ of the site will look like a traditional news site, thematically arranged with current stories and themes being investigated by students reporters. The ‘back end’ of the site allows us to set themes for students to investigate, we can ‘dump’ names for potential interviewees and post video and audio. The students can use the resources posted by either the lecturers or use interviews, audio and visual files posted by other students to make their own stories. There is an archive, where images, text, sound and video can be stored for re-purposing towards other stories or further research by students. There is also a discussion forum to be utilised for multi-disciplinary collaborations between journalism, design or multimedia students.

Students can collaborate or use and contribute resources individually. Eventually the opportunities for research from the news desk will be extended through globally networked relationships that the students have cultivated. This will allow news to be posted not just by students in Australia, but by students at ‘sister’ universities all over the world, continually posting news stories according to issues that students have collaborated on. This will allow news stories to be posted continually, not just during the Australian university semester. An important aspect of the news desk is that it does not give ownership to materials or stories—no one student can claim a story or ownership of an idea, the process of researching and constructing a news story is very much a collaborative process. This differs from use of online resources in traditional journalistic practice, which misunderstands the egalitarian and collaborative nature of online environments.
This mode of teaching reflects a new reality for journalists; they can no longer be distant observers of events or people. As Kevin Anderson’s example of the Iraqi soldiers shows, increasingly, journalists will be using their personal, online, collaborative engagements to research and write the news. Already, audiences have become more active in pursuing and commenting on news, and journalists have used this audience interaction to research and write their stories. As Anderson (2006) has blogged:

I believe that social media gives journalists the opportunity to develop a direct relationship with ‘the people formerly known as the audience’. The tools make it easy for journalists to carry on a conversation with readers, involve them in reporting and build a loyal community. To me, it is a competitive advantage… I draw on the wisdom in the crowds to enhance my journalism (Anderson, 2008).

This approach to reporting emphasises distinct editorial policies of transparency that involve audiences in the process of reporting in meaningful ways. In this context, Bruns (2005: 212) has described the relationship between journalists and audiences, especially bloggers, as symbiotic, often working together to report, filter, discuss and report the news. Many journalists are bloggers themselves, and Hiler (2002) has suggested that these online interactions are used strategically by journalists to find issues and events that have not been broken within mainstream press.

Nonetheless online user contributions to reporting and writing the news have often been treated suspiciously—and sometimes contemptuously—by mainstream journalists. Some Australian experiments in allowing columnists or senior journalists to blog or report online have failed because they have not understood the conception of online reporting as distributed conversation, rather than one-way broadcast. In this sense, traditional understanding of the role of the journalist has undermined the contributions that user-generated content has made to media practice. While some journalists see this as maintaining the dignity of the profession, online journalists suggest that a culture of arrogance maintained in the mainstream media tends to treat the audience as the enemy or the uninformed (See Anderson, 2006). This top-down approach suggests that the audience only becomes knowledgeable through the news provided by journalists. To this end, the need for compelling online content appears to have been developed in some instances as ‘opinion as journalism’ where journalists themselves appear as celebrity-like commentators online (See Super Coach, 2008). Other mainstream newspapers have allowed their ‘star’ columnists to contribute to online blogs, however, these online opinion pieces have proven to simply be extended versions of broadcasting opinion. Andrew Bolt, a popular right-wing columnist is particularly famed for his ‘snarkiness’ in responding to critical comment from his users (See Bolt, 2008). This suggests that traditional understandings of the ‘top-down’ process of journalistic process continues, in that columnists are not so interested in a conversation about their opinions, but simply their broadcast distribution.

Indeed, Vicky Taylor (2008), head of Interactivity at the BBC, has suggested that user-generated content continues to need development as a mainstream journalistic tool (Taylor, 2008). While the term ‘user-generated content’ is globally understood, many audience members still don’t know how to use the technology in order to participate
meaningfully in making the news. The BBC has attempted to combat this by posting online tutorials explaining basic things like webcam and backlighting images to help people contribute. Taylor has suggested that journalists themselves are resistant to using social media or user-generated content because they believe that it is not time-efficient or effectively moderated and verified material. The BBC’s own research has shown that audience members actually prefer the user-generated content to be moderated by BBC journalists before publication online (Taylor, 2008). The survey suggested that unmoderated content appeared amateurish compared to the consistent quality of traditional journalism.

These problems point to some issues with the somewhat utopian notions associated with using new media within journalistic practice. Unless audiences are shown how to participate in meaningful ways, this type of journalistic practice threatens to be criticised as similarly elitist and intimidating as traditional reporting formats. Theorists such as Mark Poster (2007) have already criticised the elitist nature of technology, suggesting that economic, political and technological differences between nations threaten the democratic potential of new media. On the other hand, in utilising interactivity in the journalistic process, the consistent quality and veracity of the news need to be determined. Some journalists have rightly pointed out that the ‘authority’ of a news brand is typically undermined by inconsistent quality amongst user-generated content. Moderating all the visual, audio and printed content contributed by users can be difficult, especially considering that the BBC received 11,000 images of the London bombings from online users (Taylor, 2008).

Nonetheless, the sheer volume and depth of interactivity online suggests that journalistic practice in future will continue to involve an interactive collaboration with users, use of multimedia content, and a step down from the traditional attitude of journalists towards their role as ‘gatekeeper’ of information. In an age of compelling content, it is the students who go on to be journalists capable of using technology creatively that will provide the most interesting news stories. The BBC has already recognised this and Taylor (2008) has suggested that the first questions asked of recent journalism graduates in job interviews are “Do you have a delicious account?” “What types of articles do you Digg?” and “What was the last subject you blogged about? Perhaps the same questions can be asked of journalism educators in Australia. If this is how journalists will increasingly be expected to work, how do we incorporate these changes within the curriculum? It seems that pedagogical approaches to journalism will continue to be affected by the ongoing changes in use (and abuse) of online media to investigate and report the news. The challenge for educators appears to be in choosing ‘best practice’ from the multitude of somewhat experimental uses of technology.

In developing content for Swinburne’s journalism units, our answer has been to mimic these changes in assessment. To this end, Swinburne University’s media department has emphasised in the content of their journalism subjects that quality comes in integrating user-generated content and collaborative effort with the existing structures and authority of existing journalistic practice. Using the technology in an authoritative manner is important and this means that existing structures of journalistic practice such as veracity of information and disciplined writing continue to be important. While Swinburne wish
to be continually experimental in the use of new technology to write and report news, effectively teaching students means that the technology is used to distinguish quality and consistency of journalistic practice.

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**References:**


