

**CONVERGENCE SKILLS AS DEMANDED BY NEWSPAPER EMPLOYERS,  
TAUGHT BY JOURNALISM PROGRAMS**

by

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## **Abstract**

Convergence—the blending of old-media and new-media content delivery technologies—poses challenges for new hires in journalism. In the past, journalists were expected to align with skill sets specific to print or to broadcast content delivery technologies. Nowadays, print journalists are expected to have some broadcast-news skills, and broadcast journalists to have some print skills. Both are expected to have some Web-based skills.

This study coded skill sets in job ads posted by U.S. newspapers and the journalism syllabi of North Carolina universities. It also surveyed North Carolina journalism students about the time spent in journalism classes on various skill sets.

The results suggest differences between the job ads and syllabi, notably for the skill of using social media journalistically. Areas of similarity include employers' desire for and instructors' teaching of multiplatform (e.g., convergence) skills, and such traditional skills as newswriting. The results suggest a need for more convergence instruction in certain skill areas.

## **Convergence Journalism**

Newspapers have struggled for years. Since 2003, for example, newspaper circulation has gone down 60.4 percent at an average of 3.4 percent per year, according to the State of the News Media report for 2015 (Pew Research Center, 2015). At the same time, advertising revenue at newspapers has declined 63.5 percent, from \$44.9 billion in 2003 to \$16.4 billion in 2014 (Pew

Research Center, 2015). The decreases have led to shrinking employment in the newsroom as employers are forced to make budget cuts.

As of the last American Society of News Editors Newsroom Employment Census (Pew Research Center, 2015), the total number of newsroom employees at newspapers has declined 33.2 percent, from 54,200 in 2003 to 36,700 in 2013. With fewer positions, employers have to judiciously choose who they hire, especially as they face competition from online-native competitors. So far, newspaper employers seem to be focused on hiring journalists with “convergence skills,” or the ability to work across content delivery platforms (Criado & Kraeplin, 2003). University journalism programs have been working toward teaching those skills to students (Huang et al, 2006).

This study will look at what specific convergence skills the journalism industry is looking for in employees, and whether university journalism programs are preparing students with those necessary skills. This will be accomplished by through a content analysis of journalism job advertisements and university journalism syllabi, and a survey of journalism students.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Rise of convergence***

“Convergence” has been defined as a “merging of specialized knowledge areas associated with organizational work for particular media platforms” (Lowrey, Daniels, & Becker 2005, p. 33), or as “some combination of news staffs, technologies, products, and geography from previously distinct print, television, and online media” (Singer, 2004, p. 838).

Initially, convergence typically took place in the form of partnerships between newspapers and TV stations. However, these partnerships began to diminish as the 2000s came

to an end (Kraeplin, 2013). Instead, news organizations began to produce their own multiplatform content due to better technology (Kraeplin, 2013), which has led to the creation of platform-agnostic journalists, or journalists who can seamlessly work in print and in broadcast and on the Web and smartphones.

Steve Outing (2009), writing in *Editor & Publisher* magazine, imagined these future journalists as

multi-functional journalists who are comfortable carrying around a digital camera and tiny video camera; who make it part of their routine to record audio for possible use in podcasts or multimedia project sound clips; who are regular users of social networks and understand how to leverage them to communicate with and attract new readers, and share some personal information about themselves as well as promote their work; and who are comfortable and willing to put in the time to engage and communicate with their readers or viewers, including participating in reader comment threads accompanying their stories. (para. 11)

There is also some doubt as to whether this idea of what a journalist should be is realistic (Russial & Santana, 2011). Regardless, the literature so far has shown that employers do want journalists who possess some convergence skills similar to the skill set listed by Outing. A 2008 worldwide survey of newspaper editors found that “86% believe integrated print and online newsrooms will become the norm, and 83% believe journalists will be expected to be able to produce content for all media within five years.”(Newsroom Barometer, 2008). A national survey conducted by Kaeplin and Criado (2003) found that “that the majority of [U.S.] newspaper and TV executives in our survey believe that convergence skills are important for new hires.”

### ***What skills specifically?***

Research has been directed toward determining what specific convergence skills employers are looking for so schools can adapt their curricula accordingly. Massey (2010) content-analyzed U.S. journalism job advertisements and found that while demand for traditional journalism skills was still high, there was some increase in demand for newspaper reporters at skilled in reporting across multiple platforms, particularly shooting video. He recommended that journalism programs adapt a middle-ground course of carefully pursuing convergence journalism but making sure not to follow every industry whim.

Wenger and Owens (2013) similarly examined journalism job advertisements and found that for broadcast and print, students “need strong writing skills, need to know how to work in teams under pressure with tight deadlines—they must have web/multimedia skills such as experience writing for and posting to the web—and they need solid news judgment” (p. 33). Wenger and Owens (2012) also determined that “[e]ducators would do well to get ahead of the industry need by preparing students who are ready to step into leadership roles in the area of social media and mobile delivery” (p. 23). A survey conducted by Kraeplin (2013, p. 79) found that a “strong majority of both managing editors and news directors cited social media capabilities as critical for new hires.” In another survey, Brown (2010) “found that print reporters are also clearly expected to know how to handle a digital camera” (p. 77). However, he concluded that the path that journalism education should take was not exactly clear.

### ***Attempts by academia to adapt***

University journalism programs have taken notice of convergence, and have made some progress toward creating and enacting convergence curricula. Huang, et al. (2006) reported that 60 percent of journalism schools were preparing new multi-platform curricula. Kraeplin and

Criado (2005) found that 85 percent of the journalism programs they surveyed attempted to move toward the goal of having some sort of convergence or multi-platform journalism curricula. However, Royal (2005) and Moody (2010) pointed out that these efforts have not been successful in truly preparing students with the skills they will need. One problem is that the struggles facing journalism education now may have less to do with a disconnect between the academy and the industry, and more to do with the industry facing uncertainty in its future. Hansen (2005) points out that “both the media industry and educational institutions at all levels are struggling to understand and keep up with the technological changes that are challenging every assumption they have had for decade” (p. 131).

## **Analytical Framework**

With both the industry and the academy struggling to determine which convergence skills are necessary, it is important to look at both for answers. The literature has relied on either content analyses of job advertisements or surveys of news employers to determine what skills employers are looking for. Content analyses of job advertisements have been used successfully by Massey (2010) and Wenger and Owens (2012) to determine desired skills sets by newspaper employers. An updated content analysis of journalism job ads should provide a fairly accurate look as to what employers are seeking.

When it comes to determining what skills are being taught in journalism programs, surveys of professors have been conducted in the past, but journalism syllabi have been overlooked. Syllabi provide a source of important information of what skills journalism professors are teaching students. A typical syllabus contains objectives, detail of assignments, and overall goals for what students should be learning (Sinor & Kaplan, 1998). Good syllabi are

designed to give objectives for what students should be capable of doing by the end of the course, which is directly applicable to the skills students should need to find jobs (McKeachie & Svinicicki, 2011). Ideally, if certain skills are being taught, they should be present in the syllabi. According to Criado (2005) and Huang (2006), journalism professors say they are focusing on convergence skills, so those skills should be present in those syllabi.

Of course, if convergence skills are present in the syllabi, a survey of students aimed at determining how much time their instructors spend teaching certain skills should line up with the data from the job-advertisement content analysis. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) determined that an effective undergraduate survey could be far more valuable than a resource or research-based metric at determining institutional quality (Kuh et al, 2008). For this study, such survey would provide useful supplementary data.

Given the literature's findings for job ads and, separately, for journalism curricula, this study's goal is to compare the two. To do that, it poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How closely do skills sets named in job ads line up with skills sets listed in university journalism syllabi?

RQ2: How closely do skills sets named in job ads line up with time spent on skills in journalism classes?

## **Method**

### ***Job advertisement content analysis***

The content analysis focused on newspaper job advertisements for all editorial positions. These positions include reporters, editors, managers, photographers and multimedia positions. If convergence skills are particularly important, it would make sense that all positions should be



required to have skills previously limited to one specific platform. For example, a newspaper reporter should be expected to have some of the same skills as a newspaper photographer and a TV news videographer.

Job advertisements were collected from JournalismJobs.com, a publically available omnibus journalism-jobs database. Also, job ads were collected from the online jobs lists of the major news corporations of Digital First, Gannett, Lee, Morris and Tribune. Both efforts were supplemented by drawing job ads from the online lists of 12 state and regional press associations.<sup>1</sup> The associations represent each of the four major U.S. Census regions. While JournalismJobs.com is perhaps the best known journalism jobs database, it is not complete. Certain job advertisements are posted only through corporate websites or on press association databases, hence their inclusion.

JournalismJobs posted advertisements the most often, typically many in a day, so it was sampled using the two-constructed week method suggested by Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998). Advertisements were posted less often on the corporate sites, so they were sampled twice a month, once at the middle of the month and again at the end. Press associations post advertisements even less frequently, and were sampled once a month. Duplicate advertisements were removed from the data, yielding a final count of 407 editorial journalism job advertisements.

Coding followed a qualitative method (Lowry & Xie, 2008). Key words and phrases that described certain skills or knowledge were identified in the ads. Then the words and phrases were qualitatively grouped and regrouped into categories, given the various ways the job ads phrased employers' skill and knowledge requirements. For example, the skill variable "multiplatform reporting" was phrased in job ads as "reporting on multiple platforms,"

“reporting across platforms,” and “execute digital coverage across platforms.” In all, four knowledge variables, and 15 traditional and nine convergence skill variables were identified.

### *Syllabi content analysis*

The syllabi content analysis focused on journalism syllabi from public and private universities in North Carolina that operate a convergence journalism curriculum. Requests for journalism syllabi were sent electronically to professors at these schools, with periodic reminder emails. As this study focused on skills and knowledge taught in skill-based journalism courses, syllabi that focused solely on media law or ethics were excluded. In all, 68 journalism were deemed relevant to the study. Skills and knowledge were identified in the syllabi in the same way as with the job advertisements.

### *Survey*

The survey targeted undergraduate students in journalism programs at public and private universities in North Carolina. The survey was open to students majoring in broadcast journalism, communication, communication with an emphasis in journalism, journalism, print journalism or public relations. Journalism minors and students who took journalism courses but did not fit into the other categories also could complete the survey.

To administer the survey, pre-notification emails were sent to journalism department heads at the universities, following the Tailored Design Method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). In some cases, the department head forwarded the request relevant journalism instructors in the unit. A few days later, the departments and instructors received an email embedded with the link to the Web-based survey. The email asked them to distribute the link to students in their programs.

The survey was created through Qualtrics software. Students were asked indicate the class time they spent on each of the skills and knowledge from the job-ad content analysis. A 5-point Likert scale was used, with “1” meaning “no time,” and “5” meaning “a lot of time.” Responses were averaged into a scale for easy comparison to the job advertisement and syllabi data.

## **Findings**

### *Sample Characteristics*

Roughly half (n = 206) of 407 the job advertisements were from the databases of either JournalismJobs or Gannett. Specifically, JournalismJobs yielded 110 job advertisements, or 26 percent of the total, to 96 (24%) for Gannett. The press associations Yilded 80 (20%) job advertisements. The remaining 121 (30%) job advertisements came from the Morris, Lee, Tribune and Digital First online corporate jobs lists. There were a few job advertisements that did appear on both JournalismJobs and the corporate databases, and on JournalismJobs and the press association databases. All duplicate job advertisements were eliminated.

The study also yielded 68 syllabi provided by professors at public and private universities in North Carolina. Twenty-six (38%) of the syllabi came from UNC-Chapel Hill, the largest and most prominent journalism program in the state. Twelve (18%) syllabi came from East Carolina University. The remaining 32 (47%) syllabi came from University of North Carolina-Wilmington, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, Wake Forest University, Elon University, Western Carolina University, University of North Carolina Central, and University of North Carolina-Asheville.

### ***Research Questions***

The skills that were identified in the content analyses of job advertisements and syllabi were divided into traditional skills, convergence skills, and knowledge and traits. Table 1 reports the findings for traditional skills. Among the job advertisements, “newswriting” was present in 70.3 percent the 407 ads, and news gathering was present in 51.6 percent of them. That is mirrored in the syllabi, where newswriting was present in 80.9 percent of the 68 syllabi and news gathering was present in 69.1 percent.

The advertisements and syllabi were significantly different for six traditional skills. The sharpest differences were for time-management skill of meeting deadline, interviewing and networking. Each skill appeared far more frequently in the syllabi than the advertisements. This could be attributed to an assumption by newspapers that prospective employees will have these skills. Teamwork, investigative reporting and news-beat reporting appeared more frequently in the advertisements.

Table 2 reports the findings for convergence skills and as it shows that the catch-call “multiplatform reporting” was topped the list for both the journalism ads and the syllabi. It was present in 62.9 percent of the ads and in 79.4 percent of the syllabi. However, specific individual convergence skills received much less of an emphasis in both the job advertisements and the journalism syllabi. There were a few exceptions. The job advertisements put a significantly greater focus on outreach than the journalism syllabi did. Significantly more of the job advertisements asked for “social media” skills than journalism syllabi showed being taught.

Table 3 reports on knowledge and traits requested in the job advertisements and emphasized in the syllabi. Associated Press style, journalism ethics and journalism law present in far more syllabi than job ads. This could be because the industry operates under an assumption

prospective employees already have acquired these skills thus, they do not need to be listed in job advertisements. Conversely, the advertisements requested knowledge and traits associated with “teamwork” and “self-motivation” more often than did the syllabi.

Significantly more syllabi than advertisements listed AP style, journalism ethics and media law. Self-motivation appeared significantly more frequently in the advertisements.

The survey yielded 51 respondents, which is admitted fewer than expected. Still, the survey data provide an indication, although a cautious one, of how much time is devoted to the skills, knowledge and traits listed in journalism syllabi. Table 4 reports the findings for the survey’s “time spent” scale for traditional skills.

The survey data suggest that the students spent a lot of class time learning a handful of traditional skills and knowledge items. Those were how to use Associated Press style, how to gather facts and write news stories and feature stories, how to meet deadlines and practice ethical journalism. By comparison, news writing and newsgathering were the top two traditional job skills in the job advertisements.

## **Conclusions and Discussion**

Newspapers are in a long period of transition after steep declines in readership and advertising revenue, and the emergence of the need to adapt to online media (Pew Research Center, 2015). While convergence journalism seems to have arisen as the most common solution, it has not yet reached a point where it is the new normal in the print journalism industry. Newspaper have not yet reached a point where all newswriters have the same multiplatform skill set. If this is the future of journalism, this study suggests that is have not yet arrived.

For example, the data suggest that multiplatform and convergence skills are at the same time highly valued and not highly valued. Both the job advertisements and the syllabi listed the catch-all “multiplatform reporting” as a highly valued skill, but then gave much lower emphasis to specific convergence skills. In fact, convergence journalism skills are not emphasized as much as expected in either the newspaper job ads or the journalism syllabi. In most cases, when convergence skills are emphasized, it tends to be through a general emphasis on “multiplatform skills” or “reporting across platforms.” Quite possibly, while both the industry and the academy desire multiplatform skills, they are not entirely certain what those skills should be.

Almost all the convergence skills that were coded for were not present in over 20 percent of the job advertisements. This suggests that some specialization still exists in the journalism workplace, and that it may not be necessary for journalism students to learn every single convergence skill. The only exceptions were the need for video, social media and outreach expertise. The video aspect lines up with Massey’s (2010) previous research, which found almost 20 percent of newspaper advertisements requested videography skills. This study of job ads finds that figure is now about 28 percent.

It’s possible that as newspapers move to having more content online, more video skills will be required of print newswriters. Interestingly, the journalism syllabi actually suggest that the academy is keeping up with the industry in this regard. This is most likely due to programs that combine their print and broadcast tracks.

Social media, a convergence skill, was emphasized more in the job ads than in the syllabi. One explanation would be that as with any profession, there are general skills to be learned in the classroom and particular skills to be learned on the job. Also, it may be a skill that professors assume their students already know, without considering the nuances of using social media for

journalistic purposes. Outreach, another convergence skill, appeared significantly more often in the job ads than in the syllabi. The concept of responding to readers and being involved in the community is certainly a skill that could be learned on the job and may be unnecessary for journalism programs to focus on in their curriculum.

Traditional skills are still heavily emphasized by both the industry and the academy. Whatever path journalism is taking, it's clear that writing, reporting, and the ability to meet deadlines will be a part of it. Photography may be a skill journalism educators should pay more attention to. While not necessarily a convergence skill, it was present in almost 40 percent of the syllabi, and could conceivably rise with the decline of full-time photojournalists employed at newspapers.

So far, it appears that despite the rise of convergence journalism, the editorial departments at newspapers are not exclusively looking to hire do-it-all, backpack reporters. Traditional skills are the most important for prospective hires to have. However, it would be prudent for journalism programs to pay attention to photo, video and social media skills. One limitation of the advertisement-based approach to analyzing skill demands is that while it shows how often certain skills are present, it is unable to capture the importance that hiring editors assign to those skills. Future research should survey these editors on this point.

While syllabi content analysis was limited to the state of North Carolina and by the number of respondents, it suggests that journalism programs may not be too far behind the curve when it comes to preparing students to be successful, especially with broadcast and print programs being more than often merged into one program. With the journalism field changing the way it is, it is perhaps more helpful to give students core skills so they can be adaptable, rather than chasing after specific skills that vary in popularity. Both the academy and the

industry could do a better job of defining what they mean by using the term “multiplatform” as opposed to using it as a buzzword just to suggest that they are ahead of the curve.

One limitation of this study is its use of journalism syllabi from North Carolina only. Future research should consider analyzing a wider array of syllabi. The survey of journalism students also was limited to North Carolina, and had difficulties in the distribution of survey invitations and reminders. Future research should consider ways of distributing surveys directly to students, as opposed to relying on department heads and professors.

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> They were: Alabama Press Association, Arizona Newspapers Association, Kansas Press Association, Kentucky Press Association, Iowa Newspaper Association, Mississippi Press Association, New England Newspaper & Press Association, New Jersey Press Association, Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association, Washington Newspaper Publishers Association, Arizona Newspapers Association and the Oklahoma Press Association.



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**TABLE 1. Correspondence of traditional journalism skills in newspaper job ads and convergence syllabi**

Skill	Job Ads (% present)	Journalism syllabi (% present)
Deadline	38.3	70.6 ***
Designing print news pages	24.3	25.0
Doing breaking news	23.6	14.7
Doing enterprise reporting	19.9	20.6
Doing feature stories	19.4	29.4
Doing investigative reporting	19.9	8.8 *
Doing news-beat reporting	40.8	22.1 *
Editing photos	12.0	16.2
Editing stories (copy editing)	33.7	27.9
Interviewing	6.9	58.8 ***
Networking (sources)	12.8	41.2 ***
Newsgathering	51.6	69.1
Newswriting	70.3	80.9
Photography	37.3	27.9
Teamwork	46.2	23.5 **

Goodness of fit chi-square: \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 2. Correspondence of new journalism skills in newspaper job ads and convergence syllabi**

Skill	Job Ads (% present)	Journalism syllabi (% present)
Branding	6.9	5.9
Content management software (CMS)	18.2	16.2
Designing for web	7.4	8.8
Doing multiplatform reporting	62.9	79.4
Editing videos	9.3	16.2
On-air presence	6.1	13.2
Outreach	27.0	8.8 **
Social Media	55.3	26.5 **
Videography	28.3	27.9

Goodness of fit chi-square: \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 3. Correspondence of journalism knowledge and traits in newspaper job ads and convergence syllabi**

Skill	Job Ads (% present)	Journalism syllabi (% present)
AP Style	18.9%	47.1% ***
Journalism/media ethics	9.1	55.9 ***
Journalism/media law	10.3	36.8 ***
Self-Motivation	29.5	5.9 ***

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 4. Correspondence of journalism skills in job ad and university programs**

Skill	Job Ads (% present)	Journalism syllabi (% present)	Journalism class- time scale
AP Style	18.9%	47.1%	3.8
Branding	6.9%	5.9%	1.9
CMS	18.2%	16.2%	2.0
Copy Editing	33.7%	27.9%	2.6
Deadline	38.3%	70.6%	4.0
Designing for print	24.3%	25.0%	2.3
Designing for web	7.4%	8.8%	2.0
Doing breaking news	23.6%	14.7%	2.8
Doing database reporting	10.8%	11.8%	2.2
Doing enterprise reporting	19.9%	20.6%	3.2
Doing feature stories	19.4%	29.4%	3.7
Doing investigative reporting	19.9%	8.8%	3.1
Doing multiplatform reporting	62.9%	79.4%	3.0
Doing news beat reporting	40.8%	22.1%	3.1
Editing photos	12.0%	16.2%	2.0
Editing videos	9.3%	16.2%	2.3
Interviewing	6.9%	58.8%	3.5
Journalism/media ethics	9.1%	55.9%	4.0
Journalism/media law	10.3%	36.8%	3.0
News gathering	51.6%	69.1%	3.6
News-writing	70.3%	80.9%	3.9
On-air presence	6.1%	13.2%	2.2
Outreach	27.0%	8.8%	2.2
Photography	37.3%	27.9%	2.0
Self-Motivation	29.5%	5.9%	
Social Media	55.3%	26.5%	2.9
Sourcing	12.8%	41.2%	3.0
Teamwork	46.2%	23.5%	
Videography	28.3%	27.9%	2.1

Note: Class-time scale ranged from 1 = no time, to 5 = a lot of time.