



Journalism Curriculum Frameworks Shift Toward Skills, Interdisciplinarity

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Abstract

Through a qualitative, multiple case study, this inquiry looked at what curricular orientations were driving change within three journalism/communications programs. A trio of small programs revising their curricular frameworks were analyzed using a constructivist paradigm, and through interviews, curricular analysis, and faculty surveys, a trend away from a humanist or liberal arts framework emerged. Instead, social efficiency and reconceptualist orientations were guiding curriculum revisions, leading to an increase in skills-based interdisciplinarity for these programs. Implications of these changes ranged from course selections to departmental identity, and other journalism/communications programs can compare their contexts to these to note possible motivations and consequences of shifting curricular orientations.

Long part of liberal arts-oriented colleges and departments, many journalism and communications programs are now revising their curricula, particularly as professional journalism undergoes so much change. This restructuring of course descriptions and required classes often leads to faculty debate, directly or indirectly, about which approaches or curricular frameworks will best serve both students and the profession. As the future of journalism unfolds parallel to these revisions, this study focused on the philosophical orientations behind faculty decisions to remake curricula.

Goodman (2017) opens her book *Global Journalism Education in the 21st Century* by asserting: “In this current era of great economic, political, technical, and cultural upheaval, journalism educators and trainers worldwide have an unprecedented opportunity to fortify and significantly shape the future of journalism”

(p. 1). For Goodman, it is a wave of nationalism, publishers and presses in economic decay, and high-level interest in overtly undermining journalistic trust that bring J-Schools to this point. Goodman said debates among journalism educators on how to educate are unending, with the exception of a few accepted premises: quality reporting, increased transparency, and storytelling using various tools and technologies, what media often call “across platforms” (p. 2). Beyond these concepts, there is “delicate balance between practical and contextual knowledge” with some programs pursuing a broad-based, academic focus, others touting platform-specific, digital skills, while others transcend the notion of a J-School for an interdisciplinary concept of communication (Deuze, 2006). Regardless, there is an urgency, with programs facing uncertainty in funding, enrollment, and purpose; addressing curriculum is part of the solution for

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many. Therefore, research and reflection are needed to understand curricular choices in actual institutions, from a revised curriculum map, to a social media class, to a new digital concentration, as the curricular orientations driving choices will result in the training for the next generation of professionals (Deuze, 2006; St. Clair, 2015). This research pursued insight into the orientations applied to journalism curricula in three institutions and what such pivots could mean for the future of journalism education.

Literature Review

Brandon (2002) found that the debate about journalism higher education has never been settled, partly due to incongruencies in underlying educational philosophies. Departments and colleges of journalism have come in numerous incarnations during their 150 years in existence, and intense debate about which curriculum orientation is superior has not ceased (Brandon, 2002). Journalism curricular shifts during this time, however, have mostly mirrored the conceptual frameworks of already-established educational curricular orientations – from a liberal arts/academic (humanist), to a pragmatic/skills-based focus (social efficiency), to a social reconstructionist (social meliorist), to a now interdisciplinary emphasis (reconceptualist) (Kliebard, 2004). Understanding each of these curriculum orientations is useful as a conceptual framework for seeing trends in journalism education.

A humanist curriculum orientation stretches back to the founding of education in the United States. As curriculum theorist and educational historian Herbert Kliebard (2004) noted, humanism is focused on the “windows of the soul” as seen through the major disciplines and robust amounts of reasoning (p. 15). For journalism education, the humanist tradition means a liberal arts education where students hone their intellect. This orientation was codified by Joseph Pulitzer, who in 1904 said journalism was an “intellectually taxing craft” for which he “sought an opportunity to formalize the preparation of such journalists, rather than to leave the matter to chance, and thereby to distribute more widely the moral and intellectual qualities he believed journalists needed to possess” (as cited in Adam, 2001, p. 319). Pulitzer believed study of all the major subjects should be part of a journalism education, including “Ethics, Literature, Truth and Accuracy [or systems of evidence and bibliography], History, Sociology, Economics, Arbitration, Statistics, Modern Languages, Physical Science, and Ideas”

(Adam, 2001, p. 320). One author of a widely used journalism text, Melvin Mencher, noted the same in 1990, defending a liberal arts education for journalists due to science, proof, verifiability, objectivity, and rationality. “Journalism education, Mencher says, is ‘the university’s center of Enlightenment values, the focus of a truly liberal education’” (as cited in Parisi, 1992, p. 6).

Sets of job-specific abilities are a defined link to a social efficiency curriculum orientation, which gained notoriety in the 1920s and 30s, when the priority was an education that was “more directly functional to the adult life-roles” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 24). This curricular model, said to be socially efficient, was to be vocational and work oriented. Media sponsorships, vocational pressures, accreditation standards, and the fact that many journalism educators come from the field themselves, all drive an orientation for preparation in the industry (Mensing, 2010). According to Reese (1999), “From the standpoint of the news media themselves, however, the training role predominates. Editors, for example, often typically say that a journalism program’s purpose is to ‘produce better candidates for jobs in our newsrooms’” (pp. 70-71). Social efficiency also translates as a professional model of journalism education, where training students into a codified and legitimate profession is vital. “The current public unease over synergistic media, the blurred lines between news and entertainment, and the increasingly conglomerate face of journalism make the reassertion of educational authority by the professional quarter a natural response to preserve legitimacy” (Reese, 1999, p. 77).

Deuze (2006) noted that a skills-based curriculum trains journalists who know *how* but may not know *why*, which is how social meliorism or social reconstructionism crept into journalism education in the 1950s and ’60s. The original concept was espoused much earlier by Lester Frank Ward, who, according to Kliebard (2004), believed education was a “direct and potent instrument of social progress” (p. 22). For journalism education to be a tool for a more just society, a retooled focus on ethics, public service, upholding the fourth estate, and a renewed emphasis on a free press’s role in democracy was crucial. The 2007 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) model journalism curriculum was inspired by “an increased recognition of the crucial role of journalism in promoting democracy, and this has created an urgent demand for well-trained journalists” (UNESCO, 2007). It is an organic notion of

critical theory as applied to journalism curriculum:

Recent exposures of the damage wrought by unaccountable powers upon our environment and social fabric and of the inability of our political systems to defend us underline the need for professionals who scrutinize, evaluate and hold to account. Only journalists can perform these functions; indeed, journalists are often the only guarantors of truth-telling and human rights. (de Burgh, 2003, p. 110)

In a social meliorist orientation, curriculum is built to imbue journalists with a sense of their place in culture creation and shaping the public's understanding of the world (Skinner et al., 2001).

Starting in the 1970s, a new curriculum orientation was born not to prescribe, but to understand how previous orientations could be contextualized. Reconceptualists such as Macdonald and Huebner situated the individual inside his or her world in a multidisciplinary way, which meant a move away from quantified, standardized frameworks and toward the rapidly changing cultural and social realities of humanity (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008). Specifically, a reconceptualized journalism curriculum meant "a bit more reflecting... upon the extent to which the curriculum is a product of such larger social and political conditions," so journalism education became highly contextual and specialized (Skinner et al., 2001, p. 357). One reconceptualist influence was posited by Mensing (2010) who researched breaking the "industry-centered" model with a community focus. She believed curriculum centered on individual communities could:

reconnect journalism with its democratic roots and take advantage of new forms of news creation, production, editing and distribution. Rather than conceptualizing an independent reporter as the "defining role in American journalism," a community-oriented model of journalism would place the journalist as reporter, editor and facilitator within a community. (Mensing, 2010, p. 512)

Every decision would be within a unique context that journalists would understand, navigate, interpret, and apply for future reporting. This orientation would examine information networks, enterprise new delivery systems, and reform current practices while pulling from all disciplines.

These four curricular orientations are conceptual frameworks that have, explicitly or implicitly, guided

decisions in journalism education. Curricular change is occurring en masse today, but in what direction and based on what curricular orientations?

Method

To study journalism curricula shifts qualitatively, three institutions were recruited based on ties with the AEJMC Small Programs Interest Group (SPIG) and their current engagement with curriculum revision. Smaller programs were selected due to a perceived gap in research regarding these types of curricula. Accreditation was not a requirement for the institutions although one was accredited through ACEJMC. Within each institution, a document analysis of the former and revision (or current ideas for) curriculum, a faculty online questionnaire about curricular choices, and two semi-structured interviews with faculty decision-makers regarding changes drove the research method.

Institution A enrolled approximately 3,000 students, with around 150 majors in its journalism/communications program and 12 full-time faculty members. It is not ACEJMC accredited. Two full-time faculty members were interviewed, identified by the pseudonyms Annie and Victoria, and six online questionnaires were completed by full-time faculty members. With an enrollment of approximately 5,000 students at the university, Institution B had 130 majors in its communications/journalism program and seven full-time faculty. It is not ACEJMC accredited. Identified by pseudonyms, Dolores and Franklin, two full-time faculty members were interviewed, and two online questionnaires were completed by other full-time faculty members. A bit larger, Institution C had 10,000 students total, with approximately 400 majors and nine full-time faculty members. It is ACEJMC accredited. Louise B and Orville were the pseudonyms for two full-time faculty members interviewed, and three online questionnaires were completed by full-time faculty members.

Inductive, open coding was used to analyze the curricular documents, questionnaires, and interviews, and dependability and trustworthiness were reinforced with the use of reflexive journaling, an external audit from a journalism faculty member at a peer institution, and methodological triangulation.

Results

For Institution A, the curriculum taught prior to 2017 was 40 credit hours in five tracks, with nine required

courses. Within the core, four courses addressed tools or media production. More than half of the elective choices had interactions with tools or product creation, according to course descriptions. Another four courses indicated critical discussion about the role of media. Skill sets predominated most course descriptions. The biggest change in the framework for Institution A upon curricular revision, post-2017, was five tracks changed to three concentrations. Learning outcomes now focused on research and theory, rather than practical skills, with more emphasis on context and audience. Half of the new major's core specifically noted analysis of concepts across disciplines. The core cut across the three concentrations in the department, and its course descriptions tied together communications from various perspectives, as film and screenwriting were intertwined with news writing courses.

The faculty noted Institution A was inside of a staunch liberal arts university, which drove how the curriculum was originally devised, prior to 2015. Annie asserted frameworks then were “classical, humanistic – we did that, the liberal arts approach, in the former curriculum.” One faculty member was loath to pivot to the last two reinventions of the curriculum because it abandoned that approach. “I don't think every course should be digitally-focused, since a traditional journalism course is still very useful. Rather than that, I believe having a new course of digital media will be more useful.” Victoria agreed the humanist orientation was the best fit for most faculty:

We are definitely in the humanist, liberal arts tradition. ... We are a liberal arts institution, and we have the core; it's not as significant as it used to be, but that is an important part of the ... heritage. So many of our courses come out of rhetorical theory and the rhetorical tradition. That shapes and frames who we are ... we're in the humanities, our division is humanities, and we see ourselves in that sense.

Even rooted in humanism, nearly all faculty from Institution A spoke in social efficiency terms: skills, job preparation, tools, and professionalism. Victoria said “what we are also trying to do, though, is prepare students for the world they are entering ... how do we take those humanities courses, so they can transition into easily into whatever area they choose.” To formulate the new curriculum, the faculty was speaking with professionals in various fields. One faculty member agreed these discussions would help “adapt

the coursework to relate to needs of students and industry.” A reconceptualist orientation is contextual and interdisciplinary, which was evidenced through qualitative comments about the recent curriculum shift. Annie mentioned providing skills for “no matter where they end up, and it might not even be in journalism.” Part of Institution A's goal was also to offer more overview or survey-style courses to attract students from outside the major. “We are attracting more freshman and potentially more majors,” according to Annie. Other faculty, from the questionnaires, said integration was key, so students could “work and think in several areas” particularly as “traditional journalism (a.k.a. ‘the paper’) is unlikely to continue into the far future.” This desire for theory and skills across discipline boundaries was echoed in other comments: “Consequently, the research, critical thinking, storytelling, and writing skills need to be cultivated for journalists in a variety of media. Recognition of differences in writing styles for various media and platforms is also important.” Victoria was even more explicit:

[Reconceptualist] is very much where we are. We've never been a journalism program, we've never had more than one journalism faculty member, so what we have had in the past, a much larger percentage of our students engaged in journalism, so to keep that program viable, it's going to have to change and break down the silos and broader and integrated into other areas. And, that's going to be something ... and that was part of what they said; you can't teach it in isolation – we're not a J-School, we're never going to be a J-School, and we can't think of ourselves that way. It's going to have to be thought of much more broadly than we ever have in the past.

Institution B was in the beginning stages of curriculum revision, with its last update approximately five years ago. The current core of 13 courses was composed of classes in specific areas of communication – print, TV, online, website design, and even film/advertising and communication theory – rather than survey courses, according to course descriptions. There were six slots for electives, which could be filled by courses across the university. After this core, students must select one of four minors worth another 18 hours of primarily skills-based classes.

Faculty at Institution B found value in all four orientations. Dolores said because they were within

an arts-directed college, a humanist approach was present. Yet, she acknowledged a strong emphasis on skills, as well as the First Amendment and fourth estate. Also, the administration was calling for integration between disciplines, like communications with business and theater. “So, it’s like we are trying to be everything,” Dolores said. Franklin added: “To me, it’s good and well-rounded, but I don’t know that it’s practical. ... I don’t know if you can achieve all of that. I don’t know that you can do it.” Franklin said the number one goal for graduates was “the ability to get a job ... that they are employable, but they also have a wide set of skills that can take them to different places.” Other faculty advocated for a skills-based focus, so the program would be “preparing students for jobs that don’t exist yet” with a “focus on marketable skills and transferable skills.”

However, there was also a rejection of a complete job-preparation focus. Franklin said a skills-only model can mean a university program is no more than a vocational school when J-Schools “do more than that.” Franklin emphasized problem-solving across course/curricular boundaries, but did not think “having taken eight credits of science or 14 credits of lit[erature] is the answer.” He said: “I don’t know if I ever bought into Pulitzer’s ideal that we need to know a little bit about everything. Well, we were taught that as undergrads, but what we were also taught was a good journalist can go into any situation at any time and think on your feet and figure it out.” Dolores said she wanted communications/journalism courses integrated into the university core for “very strategic reasons. ... I thought it was a good way for students who might not otherwise be exposed to media to get exposed to it and get some media literacy and get some people interested in the field.”

Institution C was also in the beginning stages of curriculum revision, but according to faculty, its framework was last fully updated approximately 26 years ago. The core of the current curriculum contained writing and foundational theories, with two media writing courses and three or more survey or seminar-style courses. The course descriptions spoke of history and structure of mass media, as well as law and ethics, along with research. Beyond the core, student options ranged from web design to public relations to race, gender, and media to online advertising, but only three of a possible 22 courses were required. Institution C’s current curriculum framework had options-based coursework where some of

the choices were skill-driven, but the core, which made up 21 hours of the total 33 required for the major, were theory-based.

Orville, at Institution C, described the program as “really committed to being a liberal arts program” both as the point of its accreditation as well as an intentional choice. Orville said since technology was ever-changing, the job of the program was to give a basic understanding that students could adapt: “The quicker things change, the more and more the basic skills, critical thinking, writing, self-expression, graphic design, the basic theories remain unchanged, and so a liberal arts approach, quite frankly, is becoming more practical all the time.” He said faculty were committed to the liberal arts model, but both he and Louise B had a desire to see skills-based, real-world opportunities for learning, too. However, Orville mentioned there was a “real concern about us becoming a tech school.” Louise B said one of her colleagues pushed for a professional program focused on job training, but “we teach students to do a job using tools, but by the time they are out of school, those tools were out of date. ... That professional stuff is great, and we do want students to get jobs, but it’s limited.” Louise B said she believed the curriculum should “not define itself so narrowly” and instead focus on storytelling broadly:

We’ve got space for film, we’ve got space for web design, we’ve got space for video game design, and that’s one of the things that beautiful about communications versus other disciplines: We are inherently interdisciplinary. We get tied up in saying “this is our discipline” when in fact it’s not. ... We are constantly stealing from sociology, economics, history, English, anthropology, and that’s actually the strength, not the problem. The strength is the interdisciplinarity, that sort of marks this discipline, and the more we try to say we are our own thing, the farther way we are from what our value is.

Discussion

The qualitative data provided links to all four curricular orientations in this study – humanist, social efficiency, social meliorism, and reconceptualist. Participants said each of the frameworks had value for a communications or journalism degree. Among the cases studied, faculty from all programs were historically rooted in humanism, but in the analysis of curriculum and the qualitative answers of faculty, a

“dynamic tension,” as Orville noted, in a movement toward another orientation(s), emerged. Institutions A, B, and C reflect reconceptualist orientation choices in their future-facing curriculum discussions, while Institutions A and B also conveyed themes locating them in a social efficiency orientation. All programs were implementing more skills-based courses and classes across concentrations, minors, or even other majors, to provide a broad base for interest and possible employment.

This rising reconceptualist orientation, with an emphasis on contextual and interdisciplinary skills, could achieve two goals, according to faculty. First, it would combine students *and* faculty across separate disciplines to strengthen enrollment. According to Victoria from Institution A, one area of her program has seen increases, with nearly 70% of students “flocking to it.” This shift was problematic for faculty and the program, where Victoria said tracks “struggle to get students to take the courses.”

A reconceptualist orientation, especially with a nod toward social efficiency, allows concepts and skills to be taught fluidly across a program, emphasizing student choice and relieving pressure on individual concentrations regarding numbers. The second consideration is what learners need to understand in the current communications context. As a 2015 survey found, “Industry professionals have expressed interest in hiring individuals who have skills such as HTML coding, data analytics, digital design, new media literacy, visual storytelling, real-world problem solving, entrepreneurship, and diversity and cultural awareness” (Gotlieb et al., 2015, p. 151).

All of these skills may not be located within a single faculty, particularly in smaller programs, so educators expand curricular conceptions. For Institution A, Victoria said faculty agreed on “a sense of audience, the ability to know and understand the audience to adapt across audiences in terms of message production, flexibility, creating messages, sending and receiving them and adapting to those responses.” This reconceptualist pivot is part of a desire to equip students for various fields because as Franklin of Institution B noted, “I don’t know what it will look like in three years.”

The implications of these orientation shifts also involve questions of overextension and loss of identity. Franklin, from Institution B, said although elements of each orientation sounded positive, embarking upon all four paths was impractical. Louise B from Institu-

tion C believed any skill set could be brought within a communications degree, which might alarm social meliorist concepts of a codified discipline. Could journalism education be swallowed up by an interdisciplinary degree without clear shape or form? The decimation of journalism as a specific program was a concern for Institution A’s Annie, who saw its removal from the core to an elective during the first round of curricular revisions:

The core courses, the ones that everybody would be required to take, they eliminated journalism from that group and put in interpersonal communication, which has long been an element in our department, and we did all agree that it needed to be there. However, eliminating journalism was kind of heartbreaking to me. Journalism was right up there, and it dropped in importance ... And I also felt really badly that the name journalism was not in the track or the concentration.

As the discipline continues to evolve, the challenges that come with revisions of journalism curricula will not resolve easily (Adam, 2001; Bor, 2014; de Burgh, 2003; Mensing, 2010; Royal, 2005). This qualitative, multiple case study has illustrated that journalism programs are changing, as faculty discuss and debate ideas closely linked with education curriculum frameworks. Though not generalizable to all journalism or communication schools, the programs in this study were pivoting toward skills and interdisciplinarity. If traditionally liberal arts/humanist-oriented institutions and programs are indeed shifting toward a reconceptualist and/or social efficiency curriculum framework, it would be interesting to note over the long term if the change is due to external pressures such as declining enrollment or is part of a larger movement in the industry and therefore journalism schools. In a discipline still in flux, it is of some comfort to glimpse what could be to come for journalism education.

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