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# Teaching converged media through news coverage of the 2008 US Presidential election and inauguration



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This commentary provides insights into how the journalism faculty at Howard University in Washington, DC tested the efficacy of its approach to teaching converged media techniques during the US presidential election on November 4, 2008 and the Inauguration of President Barack Obama on January 20, 2009. Coverage of both events were conducted by students supervised by faculty mentors.

## Introduction

Today, fewer Americans pick up newspapers in the morning or turn on the television for their news. Instead, many log on to the internet, check their mobile phones for “tweets” or read blogs for the latest news and information. The news landscape has changed as individual distribution and “lateral connectivity,” which allows news consumers to quickly access information via multiple channels, has changed the media business model (Bay, 2008, p. 9). The challenge for journalism educators is to train students to report for a market dominated by social media, RSS feeds, podcasts, vodcasts, blogging and web sites, which are updated virtually every minute.

This commentary – centered on events surrounding the 2008 US presidential election and the inauguration in January 2009 – explains the experiential teaching approach of the Howard University journalism faculty. Like their counterparts at other leading colleges and universities, professors at Howard believe they must prepare their students to face a challenging workplace shaped by rapid advances in media technology, exacerbated by economic pressures made worse by global recession, and by shifting news consumption patterns.

Although all media have been affected by the economic downturn, newspapers have been especially hard hit (and are particularly illustrative of the effects) as advertising revenue and circulation have plummeted. Daily newspaper circulation in the United States has fallen more than 10% in the six months ended September 30, 2009, the worst performance since the 1940s. Advertising revenue fell more than 16% in 2008 (Perez-Pena, 2009). The impact on employment has also been dramatic. Evidence of how quickly the workplace is changing can be found in a job-cut estimate developed by an employee of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and cited in *The American Journalism Review*. According to the analysis, 15,554 newspaper jobs, or 15% of the workforce, were lost in 2008, with an estimated half of those lost jobs from among the ranks of journalists (Hodierne, 2009).

Even as economic pressures escalate, newspapers and broadcasting outlets have expanded their engagement with the internet. In doing so, they are demanding more complex skill sets from existing and potential employees. Thus, smaller news staff now perform more functions. Multi-tasking employees are becoming the norm. Reductions in staff have been abetted by a presentation style in which television and radio newscasts increasingly use their air time to summarise stories and direct viewers and listeners to web sites for more details or for “raw news” links that show uncut footage from amateur or professional videographers.

Media organisations in many parts of Southeast Asia, Scandinavia and the United States are “re-purposing material” to allow a single text to be used in various forms, meaning a reporter will cover a story, write paragraphs for use on the web site, produce a version of the story for radio and television and still write a traditional “long piece” for the next day’s paper (Quinn, 2001, p. 85). In addition, the same content can also be made available for mobile devices, such as telephones and PDAs (personal digital assistants). With changes in technology, the consumption and production of journalistic content has profound impact on how journalism is practised and taught (Quinn, 2001, p. 85).

Indeed, the web has reshaped the way news outlets work – and, more importantly, where consumers go for news. As a measure of the web’s influence among news consumers, a study by The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (2008) found that among people under 30 the internet had surpassed all other media except television as a primary source of national and international news. Significantly, the same study noted that television as a source of national and international news had fallen 11% between 2007 and 2008, while the internet had gained 25% during the same period.

The challenge for journalism faculties is to consistently engage students in new ways of learning and to offer them opportunities to become highly skilled journalists who are ready to enter the converged media workplace. This means approaching journalism education with the assumption that students no longer have the luxury of simply learning one skill or deciding to become either print or broadcast journalists. Instead, it means orienting students to produce content for multiple mediums, often under deadline pressure. In the new converged media world, news values that shape content decisions remain largely unchanged, but speed and methods of delivery continue to evolve as convergence transitions from novel and new technique to industry standard.

Convergence has been variedly defined. Landsberger offers the following: “As a communications phenomenon and controversy, convergence refers to the merging, as well as the repurposing, of content to fit (simultaneously) into broadcast, newsprint, internet, and even multimedia applications and delivery systems under a common corporate identity” (2004, p. 6). In addition, media convergence signals not only a shift in the use of technology, but a change in the relationships that exist among audiences, genres, markets, industries and technology (Jenkins, 2004). Further, with media convergence influencing the media consumption behaviour, it forces those in the media industries to re-evaluate their programming and marketing decisions designed to attract the audience (Jenkins, 2004).

Howard University offers a range of outlets for student journalism, notably ‘The Hilltop’, a nationally recognized student-run daily newspaper, with print and online editions. Other student-run media outlets include ‘Howard Today’ and ‘NewsVision’ television programs; the ‘District Chronicle’s, a weekly community newspaper; ‘Blackcollegeview.com’, an online news web site; an online ‘101 Magazine’; campus newscasts on student-run WHBC-AM; and ‘Glasshouseradio.com’, an online radio station. Students also work for WHUT-TV, the university’s public television station; WHUR-FM and WHURWORLD.com, its commercial radio station; and ‘Howard Magazine’ for the alumni.

The university’s location in the nation’s capital also affords faculty and students easy access to major news events and places them within close proximity to communications professionals at the top of their fields in government, public and private industries, including some who teach as adjunct faculty members. Although the journalism department has frequently taken advantage of these professional and geographic assets in the past, the groundbreaking 2008 presidential campaign, election and inauguration provided a unique opportunity to give students and faculty to provide real-time converged coverage of the events.

Professors from all three sequences of the journalism department – print/online journalism, broadcast journalism and public relations/advertising –pooled their

resources and skills, shared ideas and designed a comprehensive plan to facilitate students' coverage of the presidential election in November 2008 and the inauguration ceremony and celebrations in January 2009.



The faculty used its more than 200 years of journalism experience to prepare students to cover the events for the department's news outlets, as well as professional regional and national outlets. According to a study on the adoption of convergence into college curricula (Cochie, 2008), the presence of early adopters and innovators in a faculty is a key indicator that a journalism program is more likely to embrace convergence. Similarly, the study also found that 44% of 411 universities surveyed had at least one faculty member who specialised in convergence (Cochie, 2008).

In preparation for the project, students began their coverage of the presidential race in its early days and were subsequently offered special workshops and one-on-one sessions, classroom exercises and opportunities to experiment with the technology needed to produce the journalism content across multiple platforms. The result was an instructive converged media experience on Election Day and on the subsequent inauguration. Operating like a professional news team – independently and in converged teams, including print, video, still-photo and online journalists – the students produced more than 80 print articles, hundreds of photos, a dozen blogs and 20 video and audio packages. The students' work were distributed via campus media and uploaded to YouTube. On inauguration day, publications such as the *'Afro-American'*, the *(N.J.) Trentonian.com*, *'Human Nature'* online magazine and *BlackAmericaWeb.com* picked up student generated coverage.

## History of convergence at Howard University

Journalism department faculty recognised early that the digital revolution would have an important impact on the practice of journalism, and professors began to alter the curriculum to accommodate it. During the 1996-97 academic year, the department added an online reporting course to its curriculum. The course catalysed a series of developments such as making site visits to converged operations in Tampa and Orlando, Fla.; scheduling capstone courses at the same time to enhance convergence;

and forming a student-faculty-industry collaboration that led to the opening of a state-of-the-art newsroom, the Converged Media Lab, in January 2001. The facility, developed in partnership with Microsoft and the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), a news service for African American-oriented newspapers, made it possible to teach in a newsroom equipped similarly to professional converged newsrooms of the time. In Cochie's study, just 27% of the universities "have built or used a converged newsroom or classroom" (2008).

The students' work were published in the department's online and print news outlets and in more than 200 Black weekly newspapers that subscribe to the NNPA service. By 2004, students were also producing streaming audio and video feeds for other HBCUs through partnerships with NNPA, the National Association of Black Journalists and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Students learned about database reporting, and advertising and public relations students supported the work of the lab by developing awareness campaigns to alert students of the lab's benefits. Several smaller convergence projects set the stage for the massive news operation during the presidential election of 2008 and the follow-up coverage leading to Inauguration Day in 2009.

In spring 2004, three classes worked on a first-time collaboration involving the university's two newspapers, *'The Hilltop'* and the *'District Chronicles'*, and *Blackcollegeview.com*, its news web site. Reporting teams in the feature writing class developed packages to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education case in which the US Supreme Court ruled that separate schools for White and Black children were inherently unequal. The case led eventually to the dismantling of legally segregated schools throughout the United States. Copy editing students edited the packages, having researched the issue in advance, and the design students created the layouts. In addition, the stories were distributed nationally through *BlackCollegeWire.org*, a collegiate news service. The project was designed to prepare students for working in teams, a hallmark of converged news coverage, and it received recognition at the International Teaching and Learning Conference in Jacksonville, Florida.

In 2005, Howard University students engaged in extensive multimedia coverage of the aftermaths of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, filing reports from the Gulf Coast that appeared in university and outside news outlets, including *The Washington Post*. The student-journalists also filed reports from Atlanta, to which many refugees from New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast had fled. Their coverage has continued periodically in the years since to chronicle the lingering effects of the natural disasters. In 2007, students and faculty from the print/online and broadcast journalism sequences collaborated on another multimedia project, entitled "*From Black Power to Black Sunday: Student Activism in the Nation's Capital*," which was designed to record the history of student activism in the nation's capital since the 1960s. The project, underwritten by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, included a video, articles, timeline, a photograph gallery and internet links. Supervised by faculty, students acted as writers, editors and producers, carefully considering what to include and what to exclude from the five-decade time span.

## Planning and execution

A key decision in planning for the 2008 presidential election coverage was to treat the entire department as a large news organization, bringing to bear its resources for comprehensive coverage of the presidential race. Journalism students were excused from classes on 4 November 2008 to cover the election and again on 20 January 2009 to cover the inauguration. Altogether, more than 200 students were involved in coverage of Washington, DC, and the suburbs in northern Virginia and those in Prince George's and Montgomery counties in Maryland. Plans were also made to take reports from students who returned to their hometowns to vote, including New York, Chicago and Detroit, adding a national dimension to the project and providing real-time coverage of President-Elect Barack Obama's victory speech.

## Howard University News Service

Howard University Department of Journalism Students cover the 2008 Election

Wednesday, November 5, 2008

### Election Day in the Washington, D.C. Area



View Album Get your own

Photos by Howard students covering election 2008.

Posted by The Howard Election Project at 1:25 AM 0 comments

**THE HOWARD ELECTION PROJECT WASHINGTON, D.C.**

A project of the Howard University Journalism Department

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[Obama Raleigh, N.C. Rally 10-29](#)

▶ October (2)

### Howard Election Project Videos

Foreign tourists witness US electi...



http://www.youtube.com/user/HowardNetConvergence

These are videos by Howard University Students, dealing with the issues surrounding the 2008 Presidential Election.

Posted by The Howard Election Project at 1:07 AM 0 comments

Students were engaged in almost every step of the planning and execution of the projects, which provided them with insights into the complexities of effective news coverage. Faculty members gave students crash courses in blogging, the use of Twitter, video uploading and story filing via cell phones and laptops. The critical element in the project was the impact of teaching by engaging the students in experiential learning, defined as “participative, interactive, and applied. It allows contact with the environment, and exposure to processes that are highly variable and uncertain. It involves the whole-person; learning takes place on the affective and behavioral dimensions as well as cognitive dimension” (Gentry, 1990).

With the election coverage, nearly 50 students reported to their coverage areas before dawn and worked as professionals throughout the day, using multi-media tools. The student-journalists were successful in getting interviews with key public officials, such as Washington Mayor Adrian Fenty and other local, regional and national elected officials.

## Multimedia and diversity

The speed and range of coverage afforded by multimedia increases the degree to which journalists and journalism students must be sensitive to diversity. Although the faculty at Howard University, which is historically a majority Black institution, may be especially sensitive to this issue, changing US demographics, shifting views on social issues and the blurring of borders among nation states due to the internet make this a matter of concern for all journalism faculties. In fact, how student identity is influenced by media convergence as well as cultural and sub-cultural diversity suggests multi-literacies must be incorporated into literacy curriculum and research (Fitzclarence, Green & Bigum 1994, p.12; Green, Fitzclarence & Bigum 1994, p.1; New London Group, 2000). The New London Group (1996) defines literacies as communications channels and meaning-making systems, including writing, speech, and audio and visual methods of communication. In addition, these multi-literacies must consider cultural and linguistic diversity.

The election and inauguration projects offered students deadline driven, real-life experiences with people of different backgrounds and cultures – often for the first time – and allowed them to directly experience reporting diverse points of view. Fifty-seven students from the Multicultural Media History class, working in teams in the run-up to the election, began discussing and reporting on such issues early on as the names of potential candidates were bandied about and presidential hopefuls started forming exploratory committees. Students worked with a political correspondent who taught Advanced Reporting as an adjunct during the 2007–08 academic year and heard guest lectures from party officials. Student journalists also covered visiting candidates as well as a nationally televised debate held on campus during the primaries.

The text for the course, *Racism Sexism, and the Media: The Rise of Class Communication in Multicultural America*, by Clint C. Wilson, Felix Gutierrez and Lena Chao, focuses on the history of racial stereotyping and issues of diversity in media, media coverage, entertainment, advertising and public relations. Through reading it, students were surprised by their own proclivity to harbor stereotypes and biased opinions about people of other races and ethnic groups. It was a sharp reminder of the first principle of the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics: to seek truth and report

it, including the admonition to “avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status” (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996–2009).

The project forced students out of their comfort zones by requiring them to speak with members of diverse ethnic groups – in some cases for the first time – and to overcome language barriers, while conducting on-camera interviews to discover issues that concerned minority voters in the upcoming election. Students quickly realized they had to discard assumptions and found themselves checking their own personal biases while being receptive to new and different ideas. Their field work drove home the importance of gathering and reporting diverse opinions and voices far better than any lecture or textbook. Student journalists also ventured into racial and ethnic neighborhoods that received little coverage from professional reporters. The lack of coverage mirrored complaints of area residents responding in a Howard University survey who said they wanted “to see and hear the views of those like one’s self” (Byerly, 2006).

While the students’ news coverage was robust, there were also other important implications for teaching within the journalism program, including: (1) students experienced live news gathering and distribution under deadline pressure; (2) students learned how converged news coverage enabled them to provide more in-depth coverage and demonstrate their ability to utilize more media techniques and technologies; (3) faculty–editors and producers were able to reinforce the value of solid storytelling in a real world atmosphere and showcase how it is important regardless of the medium being employed; (4) faculty–editors and producers ensured basic principles of careful, ethical and complete reporting were demonstrated across media platforms; and (5) faculty and students forged new relationships that benefited both instructional learning experiences and the quality of work produced for the departmental media outlets.

## Eight steps to success

Success in this project also rested on several key steps that, if overlooked, could have resulted in a different outcome. Following are the steps taken at Howard:

### **1. Develop a plan that includes a clear, achievable set of objectives.**

At Howard, the department chair was rigorous in his assessment of whether to approve the project, which was initiated by faculty. A strong plan with a reasonable chance of success was critical. The plan also provided the chair with the data needed to unlock resources from the dean’s office, including a possible budget and approval to excuse students from classes within and outside the Department of Journalism.

### **2. Engage the key players in the process early.**

Before the plan was presented to the department chair, faculty who initiated the project enlisted support of their colleagues to serve as editors and from other departmental staff for logistical support.

### **3. Identify student opinion leaders and engage them as project supporters.**

There was some initial concern that not enough students would participate and that the project would not work. By engaging student leaders, holding meetings

and distributing flyers about the project, information spread by word-of-mouth, and students bought into the idea of participating. In the end, the project had an overabundance of student volunteers.

**4. Create a professional workspace.**

The message to the students should be critical preparation and work has been conducted to allow for their participation in the project, thus conveying an atmosphere of professionalism. Faculty should convey their support by keeping positive attitudes and offering support to students within those physical spaces.

**5. Ensure that equipment is available and in working order.**

In advance of the project, all equipment, including cameras, recorders, laptops, batteries and other electronic devices, should be inventoried. A system for checking out and retrieving equipment should be established, and the person responsible for managing the process daily should be present to assist students and faculty during the project.

**6. Assign someone to be responsible for planning and logistics, and be prepared to support that person's requests.**

Smooth follow-through requires someone to pay attention to details and to coordinate occasionally conflicting interests during the run-up and the implementation of the plan.

**7. Consider pairing more experienced students with those of less experience on converged reporting teams.**

The Howard University experience suggests that students benefited from being in both a teaching and learning role with their peers. By allowing students with various skills sets and knowledge to work together, students learn both by executing and teaching what they have been taught in the classroom.

**8. Be concerned about safety and legal issues.**

Be sure students who drive cars to cover stories are insured. Also, anticipate possible issues that might arise in the field and work to offer students possible solutions in advance, such as locations of public transit stops in the areas where the students will be reporting and where to gain access to free Wi-Fi.

## Conclusion

The path for teaching the new generation of journalism students is clear. Upon graduation, this generation will work in a converged media environment in newsrooms that operate on a continuous news cycle. They will be expected to arrive on their first day at work ready to report stories for audiences accustomed to news as an interactive tool, rather than as a simple resource. More importantly, they will compete, not only with other professional journalists, but also with increasing numbers of citizen journalists to bring the news to their audiences. The journalism faculty has recognized these phenomena and accelerated its evolution toward the teaching of journalism by seeking ways to immerse its students in the converged media environment. It is doing so by engaging them in direct experience in covering news with all of the technological implements at its disposal, as in the case of the students' coverage of the 2008 Presidential Election Day.

The converged media coverage of the election and the events surrounding the inauguration illuminated the critical importance of hands-on teaching. Although the current generation of students has come of age in the digital era, often arriving in the classroom with technical knowledge of a variety of social media and other web-based tools, the challenge for teachers is to guide them through the complexities of how to use them as effective, ethical journalists. However, faculty at Howard University personally challenge themselves to stay abreast of new developments in technology, and some even sit alongside students in workshops designed to provide basic working knowledge of software, hardware and social media platforms.

This approach has allowed faculty to focus on the enduring principles of quality journalism that include commitment to truth, accuracy and fairness, effective writing and the highest ethical behavior. It has also required an ongoing seamless integration of practical experience and classroom instruction, and although the election provided some unique opportunities, it represented a milestone on an evolutionary path that seeks to advance students' capabilities at least one step ahead of what will at all times be required of them after graduation. In covering the election and inauguration, students were required to think critically, work collaboratively and engage in entrepreneurial and innovative problem solving. Of vital importance was the engagement of the faculty as "coaches." Demanding professors were transformed into mentors with equally demanding, if not higher, standards for performance. For some students, the experience provided the first insight into what professors mean when they refer to "real world" experience.

Student successes in the future will mean continued simultaneous integration of classroom exercises and learning with practical experience. Although internships also provide practical experience, there is much value in having projects developed by the journalism department, because faculty can develop, monitor and evaluate the projects internally to ensure students learn. The election and inauguration converged coverage reinforced the connection between on-campus and off-campus experience – a vital nexus in the teaching of converged media techniques.

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