

## Employer's Expectations towards Digital Media and Storytelling Program Graduates (Case of Georgia)

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**Abstract:** The goal of this paper is to show the results of the study conducted with the Georgian media employers in order to explore their attitudes toward journalism and mass communication programs graduates. The main hypothesis of research: There is a gap between Georgian journalism schools curricula and the media industry. The main question of research: What knowledge and skills is required by the media industry in the era of digital media and visual storytelling? This research is based on the qualitative approach. A semi-structured interview method is used for this study (n=14). The interviews were conducted with editors, producers and journalists, who have at least five-year experience of working in the media industry and especially in online journalism. This study was carried out from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2019 till January 2020. According to the results of this study, the Georgian media labor market is oversaturated with journalists and very rarely new vacancies are announced. Nevertheless, there is a lack of specialists with practical skills in the digital media and multimedia journalism. As revealed by this research, representatives of the media industry face some challenges related to multimedia reporting and confirmed the hypothesis about the gap between the industry and academia. According to the research findings, were identified employers expectations, which knowledge and practical skills should the digital media and storytelling program graduates possess. On the one hand, they should have deep and systemic knowledge about current trends in the digital media and methods of digital storytelling, practical skills for multimedia journalism and, on the other hand, they should be equipped with deep and systemic knowledge about leading theories of the mass communication, innovative forms and methods of research, as well as audience engagement. As a results of this study was defined a set of specific, practical skills, which are necessary to possess for the graduates of the digital media and visual storytelling programs. Based on the results of this applied research, according to the American model (sharing experience of Loyola University, Chicago), a new MA program of digital storytelling and communication will be prepared and implemented in Georgia at IBSU.

**Keywords:** digital media and storytelling, media industry and higher education, Georgian media, employer's expectations

### Introduction

The rapid transition to digital format poses challenges for media educators because they have to keep up with the demands of the employers and labor market. Today, in the era of digital media, convergence newsroom is popular in Georgia too. In the wake of the development of internet media, multimedia journalism is becoming more and more popular, which combines text and video or audio production. So, it is unimaginable to teach the media and communication without digital communications and web technologies. However, representatives of the media industry in Georgia, not rarely mention about the gap that exists between the modern industry and the academy.

It's interesting how well higher journalism education meets the modern requirements of the media industry, what knowledge and skills should graduates of the Master of Journalism and Mass Communication program have in the era of digital media and visual storytelling to be able to find employment freely? What are the labor market requirements? This is the purpose of this paper - to show the results of the study conducted with the Georgian media employers in order to explore their attitudes towards journalism and mass communication programs graduates.

This applied research will be a basis of a new master's program in digital media and visual storytelling, created at by my initiative at IBSU (International Black Sea University, Georgia). The graduate program "Digital Media and Communication" is developed through the "Media educational program" sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in Georgia and the module "Digital Media" is developed based on the analogous program of the Loyola University (Chicago, Illinois). Prof. Richelle Rogers, Program Director for the Master's in Digital Media and Storytelling, was actively involved in the development process. The digital media and storytelling syllabi were refined and fine-tuned according to her recommendations.

## Literature Review

There are various studies conducted in different countries which present the expectations of employers about what practical skills should graduates of the master of journalism program have. Such studies were started in the previous century, but it should be noted that studies in this direction were conducted especially in the USA in 20th Century. Most studies have expressed concern that the media industry and academia are separated from each other and that there is a gap between them. For example, US scholars (Dickson, T., Brandon, W. 2000) from Missouri State University devoted special study to this topic. As other scholars (Brown, T., Collins, St. 2010) from University of Central Florida mentioned, "concerns about disconnect between the academy and the industry aren't new", and it started in nineties of the XX centuries. Wenger, D & Owens, L.C. professors of the Mississippi University emphasized that, "gaps between what journalism education provides and what employers demand make the case for more research to determine what skills are necessary to get jobs in today's newsrooms" (Wenger., D and Owens, L.C, 2013).

However, there are numerous scholarly papers that indicate the need to revise existing curricula in the wake of the modern changing media industry. Most of these studies are focused on the changing media industry and the changes that journalism school curricula needed to make in the era of the media convergence. Brown and Collins noted that: "the studies that have focused on the industry-academy connection have shown that professional journalists and educators often disagree about how much emphasis should be given to any particular type of skill or knowledge set" (Brown, T., Collins, St. 2010).

Massey analyzed US journalism program and as he pointed out, while demand for traditional journalism skills was still high, there was some increase in demand for newspaper reporters who are skillful in reporting across multiple platforms, particularly shooting video. According to his recommendation, journalism and mass communication programs are adapted to a middle-ground course of carefully pursuing convergence journalism but we have to make sure not to follow every industry whim (Massey, 2010).

As Hansen from Minnesota University indicated "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" (Hansen, 2005). When Deuze (2001) analyzed the question of educating "new" journalists, changes and challenges to the curricula in his article, he concluded that "near the start of the decade that although journalism educators appeared to understand that the media landscape was changing, they remained confused about the exact nature of the change and how best to respond" (Brown, T., Collins, St. 2010).

Australian researchers in their study tried to answer the question, "what skills and attributes do mainstream news employers say they would want in the perfect journalism or broadcasting graduate". (Callaghan, R & McManus, J. 2010). Other Australian researchers Tanner, O'Donnell & Green conducted qualitative research among news editors in order to study industry needs and journalism education. According to this study, editors agreed on the key roles of universities and as the authors concluded: "industry and universities need to work more closely, with a belief that industry could have broader input into program design and revitalization" (Tanner, S. J., O'Donnell, M. and Green, 2014). Portuguese scholars focused in their studies on the challenges of digital media and media education (Matos A.P., Festas M.I., Seixas A.M., 2016).

In terms of the age of digital media Jiang's & Rafeeq's comparative research which was conducted in 3 countries is also interesting. By examining the journalism curricula of journalism education programs in the USA, UK and UAE, as well as interviewing journalism educators, students and practitioners, this study "investigated whether and how efforts have been made to align journalism curricula to the needs of the industry" (Jiang. Sh., & Rafeeq, A., 2019).

The study of prof. Brigit, University of Georgia, is also noteworthy. This qualitative research refers to the revitalization of existing curricula in three US journalism/mas communication programs transiting to digital media. The author emphasized the role of a faculty in the movement towards a digital curriculum (Bright. A., 2018). In 2008 prof. Robin from Huston University suggested theoretical framework of digital storytelling technic as a powerful tool in a 21 centuries classroom and highlighted the emergence of digital storytelling, why it is important in modern classroom environment (Robin. R. B., 2008).

Huang and his colleagues from Indiana University conducted a national survey among US journalism educators and as well as professional journalists, news professionals, and editors. This study “found strong support for training generalists and teaching new technology while continuing to emphasize critical thinking in journalism schools. It concludes that dealing with media convergence in college journalism education is an urgent necessity” (Huang, E., Davison, K., Shreve, S., Davis, T., Bettendorf, E., & Nair, A. (2006).

According to Fahmy, a professor from Southern Illinois University, in today’s discussions in journalism programs center on media convergence, a growing number of j-schools have incorporated the emerging multi-platform into their curriculum with varying degrees. The question remains whether the focus should be more on news content or technological innovations - wrote Fahmy one decade ago and concluded, that, “thus, while students should continue to learn about convergence to be familiar with the multi-platform reporting trend and how it will evolve, they should still concentrate on excellence in traditional journalism skills” (Fahmy, S. 2008). Professor of East Carolina University Clancy asked questions in his study: how closely do skills sets named in job ads line up with skills sets listed in university journalism syllabi? How closely do skills sets named in job ads line up with time spent on skills in journalism classes? According to this study, 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” (Clancy, 2016).

As the literature review shows, while no one disputes the importance of innovation and new technologies implementation in teaching process, the debate still goes over how much traditional skills should be taught. No one disputes the development of written skills as it remains one of the most important skills for journalists and mass communication specialists. As for the Georgian context, the study of the employers, which was conducted by Georgian professors Gersamia and Toradze in 2017 is interesting. However, this study was focused on only young undergraduate journalists. According to the results of this study, "writing and editing skills" (88%) are the most important ones. Employers consider that “meeting deadlines” and “an ability to work with new technologies” are important skills as well (76%). (Gersamia, M; and Toradze., M. 2017).

Another study on journalism education conducted in Georgia (Tsomaia, T., & Keshelashvili, A., 2019) is also noteworthy. Although this research does not present the expectations of employers, but its purpose is to show the evaluation of the accreditation processes of media and communication programs in Georgia. Thus, this study, which examines the views of labor market representatives in relation to the master's program in digital media, storytelling and communication, can be said to be the first of its kind of research in Georgia. Exactly this presents novelty and currency of this study.

### **Main Hypothesis and Main Research Question**

The main hypothesis of research: There is a gap between Georgian journalism schools curricula and the media industry.

The main question of research: What knowledge and skills are required by the media industry in the era of digital media and visual storytelling?

### **Method**

To reach goal and explore this issue a social constructivism framework is used. This research is based on the qualitative approach. A semi-structured interview method is used for this study (n=14). It was a purposive

sample. The interviews were conducted with editors, producers and journalists, who have at least five-year experience of working in the media industry and especially in online journalism.

The questioned respondents are from the following media organizations: Online Newspaper “Netgazeti”; Online Magazine “Publika”; News Agency “On.ge”; Newspaper “Rezonansi”; Deutsche Welle (Local Bureau); GPB (Georgian Public Broadcaster); TV Maestro; TV1; Online Magazine “Indigo”; Newspaper “Financial Time” (Local Bureau); Investigative Studio “Monitori; Online Platform “Media Checker”.

This study was carried out from 1<sup>th</sup> September 2019 to January 2020.

## Results and Discussion

### Gap between Media Industry and Academia

As this research revealed, because of rapid changing of traditional media and moving it to in the digital platform, representatives of the media industry face some challenges related to multimedia reporting. Interviewees reported that the Georgian media labor market is oversaturated with journalists and new vacancies are advertised very rarely - only one or two every year because there are not enough jobs to employ the candidates. Nevertheless, there is a lack of specialists with practical skills in the digital media and multimedia journalism, confirming the hypothesis of a gap.

As most of respondents mentioned, in the media schools, journalism is mostly taught at a theoretical level and a big part of hired journalists studied this field in real practice in their newsrooms. “There is a big gap between journalism practice and j-schools. These are like two separate sides” (one of the TV interviewees). “Multimedia journalism is a cornerstone of modern media and there is a shortage of professionals in this field in the Georgian market. Therefore, training professionals in this field on a university basis, who will be able to develop skills through not only theoretical but also practical tools, is very important” (General producer TV Maestro).

### Scarcity of Digital Media Specialists

As we mentioned above, there are too many journalists in Georgian labor media market. In spite of this fact there is a lack of practical specialists especially in the digital media and multimedia journalism. Accordingly, all the respondents agreed that there is scarcity of digital media specialists. “In the modern market there is really a shortage of staff which is needed for multimedia newsroom. Graduates in media organizations are practically unprepared to work in newsrooms and the employers have to train, teach, prepare staff to work independently, without the help of others”. (news editor from ‘Georgian Public Broadcaster’).

One of the multimedia managers emphasized, “I have a lack of digital media and communication specialists and not only me. I have active communication with dozens of managers of various media organizations. They always complain about the lack of multimedia journalism staff; also complain about the fact that beginner journalists in their organizations need to acquire knowledge and skills in order to be able to work independently. So, there is a real shortage of competitive staff in the Georgian labor market”.

As one of the respondents mentioned, high level knowledge of the digital media is extremely necessary for 21st century journalists, media researchers or media managers. One of the producers underlined that in order to eliminate this gap, in-depth study of digital media is essential, on the one hand for the development of the modern media market and on the other hand, for graduates at the individual level to be competitive in the modern media market.

“There is a shortage of multimedia journalists in the market, in this regard at different times in the services where I worked, we had to conduct trainings and invite specialists to have a more or less insight into the field. Until now, I do not remember (with rare exceptions) a journalist who would have perfect knowledge/skills to prepare a multimedia product” (General producer TV ‘Maestro’).

Today when there is a general crisis in the field of journalism and the process of its modification is on, the transition to digital format is going on rapidly, the teaching of journalism faces big challenges. As research

shows, in order to meet the demands of the modern media industry, journalism schools need to revise their curricula in line with media transformation tendencies or to develop and implement new programs. Thus, as it has been revealed by the results of this research, there is demand for digital media and communication specialists from Georgian employers.

### ***The Goal of the Master Program***

To our question of what should be the purpose of the master's degree in journalism and mass communication, the answers were divided – only a few respondents think that the goal of MA program is teaching journalism and mass communication studies, but most of the questioned journalists, editors and producers mentioned, that the main goal of teaching should be more focused on practice.

As the interviewees mentioned, both components are necessary, “of course, it is impossible to teach journalism and communication based only on practical courses, especially at MA level. I think, in this level, students should learn deeply theories, research methods and other disciplines which develop analytical thinking, but in modern rapidly changing media environment it is necessary to have practical skills of digital media and storytelling in order to compete with undergraduates with such degrees in mass communication or journalism. I think the ratio should be 50/50 between theoretical courses and courses based on practice” (editor one of the newspapers).

“The master's program should focus on practical components and include research elements, beginner journalists need more practice to develop their skills. Perhaps 70/30 should be the ratio between the training practical skills and knowledge of theoretical subjects (One of the TV producers).

“I think the program should cover both components – theoretical as well as practical. I believe that you can not be a good practitioner if you do not have in-depth theoretical knowledge and vice versa. I think these two components complement each other to be a good specialist of media and mass communication”. Some respondents underlined too that there is not lack of only multimedia journalists, but also specialists who have skills of media critics, researches and analyzing.

“Any person is free to criticize the media for this or that mistake, however, arguing and in-depth discussion of the issue is a problem. The above mentioned indicates the ignorance of the theoretical basis of media research and the scarcity of skills needed for research. In many cases criticism is mainly based on subjective feelings. So, I think besides practical skills of digital media and storytelling, it is essential to have deep knowledge of theory, argumentation, analyzes etc.”

Most of the questioned interviewees mentioned the goal of modern MA program should be preparing media and communication specialists, who have on the one hand deep knowledge of modern tendencies of digital media, methods of digital storytelling, developing practical skills for multimedia journalists and on the other hand, they should be equipped with deep knowledge about main theories of mass communication, innovation forms or methods of research.

According to this study determined that the goal of this program is to prepare:

- ▶ Highly qualified, competitive specialists in compliance with the changing digital environment, who have deep and systemic theoretical and practical knowledge about digital media and communication.
- ▶ Graduates who have practical skills required of multimedia journalists and visual storytellers.
- ▶ Graduates who will continue lifelong learning based on the need of a rapidly changing digital media industry, gain current knowledge, refine and acquire the skills in the new technologies

### **Learning Outcomes**

Any way what are the expectations of employers, what competencies, knowledge and skills should digital media and communication graduate have? According to the survey their expectations have been determined.



“In my opinion, graduates of this MA program should have the following skills: data processing and analysis, visual storytelling, multimedia reporting, ethical use of social networks, digital media management, media research, social media analytics and etc.”

“I think, a graduate of this MA program should know the general principles of digital media, must have a thorough knowledge of manipulation techniques in the digital age, and should be able to verify information quickly and effectively in the digital world;

Should have appropriate storytelling techniques in digital media. But besides good technical skills, they should have deep knowledge of current trends and theories in digital media and mass communication, innovative methods of research, and an ability to engage key audiences” (an editor one of the online platforms).

“Graduates should have the knowledge and skills necessary for a journalist: theoretical basis, principles of media work, skills necessary for a journalist (storytelling/news writing techniques, ability to convey opinions coherently and accuracy in conveying facts and events, efficiency)” (an editor one of the newspapers).

At the same time, some respondents underlined, that modern digital media, in addition to traditional skills, creates new challenges for media professionals: to use modern technologies and skills in their work, the ability to make decisions quickly, the ability to work in stressful environment etc.

Almost all interviewees highlighted the knowledge of issues of the media ethic in the digital era and skills of critical thinking.

“I think, we must not forget that the rapid transfer of information increases the risk of errors. Issues of media ethics, risks of misinformation also remain as a challenge. Therefore, graduates are required not only the skills to convey information quickly, accurately and qualitatively, but also in-depth knowledge of media ethics and relevant regulations to protect them from making mistakes” (One of the producers).

Thus, according to the research findings, employers expectations were identified - which knowledge and practical skills should the digital media and storytelling program graduates possess. On the one hand, they should have deep and systemic knowledge about current trends in the digital media and methods of digital storytelling, practical skills for multimedia journalism and, on the other hand, they should be equipped with deep and systemic knowledge about leading theories of the mass communication, innovative forms and methods of research, as well as audience engagement.

As the results of this study, core competencies for digital media and communication specialists have been determine. A graduate of the program should possess the following field and general transfer skills:

Table 1. Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcomes:	
<b><i>Knowledge and Understanding</i></b>	<p><u><i>Graduate will have/acquire:</i></u>                      Demonstrate deep and systematic knowledge of media and communication: about forms, theories, concepts and methods of the media, trends in digital media development, digital media law and digital media ethics;                      Has a deep and systematic knowledge about digital media and visual storytelling methods and forms;                      Understands the specifics of the work of digital media platforms; innovative ways of social media analytics and forms of distribution to digital media audiences;                      Critically analyzes and investigates new ways of solving current complex problems, including the latest advances in digital media and communication and creates the groundwork for developing new and original ideas; knows how to implement innovations by applying the gained knowledge.</p>

<p><b>Skills:</b></p>	<p><u>Graduate will be able to:</u> Search for information and create content; apply visual tools and technologies (text, photos, audio, video or web) required for digital storytelling; Produce multimedia products for different platforms and distribute to the target audience; Process and analyze data; present them through visualisation; Critically analyze difficult or incomplete information; synthesize innovation and evaluate; use appropriate methodology for research; conduct social media analysis and monitoring; make conclusions; Communicate effectively with colleagues and audiences across a variety of media platforms.</p>
<p><b>Responsibility and Autonomy</b></p>	<p>Graduate has knowledge of ethical norms; understands what it means to abide by ethical standards while pursuing a professional career and to demonstrate academic fairness. Has a professional responsibility to conduct his/her own studies lifelong independently of the needs of the digital media industry.</p>

## Conclusion

According to the results of this study, the Georgian media labor market is oversaturated with journalists and very rarely new vacancies are advertised. Nevertheless, there is a lack of specialists with practical skills in the digital media and multimedia journalism. As revealed by this research, representatives of the media industry face some challenges related to multimedia reporting and confirmed the hypothesis about the gap between the industry and academia.

According to the research findings, were identified employers expectations, which knowledge and practical skills should the digital media and storytelling program graduates possess. On the one hand, they should have deep and systemic knowledge about current trends in the digital media and methods of digital storytelling, practical skills for multimedia journalism and, on the other hand, they should be equipped with deep and systemic knowledge about leading theories of the mass communication, innovative forms and methods of research, as well as audience engagement.

The main goal of this MA program will be to train graduate according to labor market expectations, prepare highly qualified competitive specialists in compliance with the changing digital environment, who have deep and systemic theoretical and practical knowledge about digital media and communication; graduates who have practical skills required of multimedia journalists and visual storytellers; graduates who will continue lifelong learning based on the need of a rapidly changing digital media industry, gain current knowledge, refine and acquire the skills in the new technologies.

To summarize briefly, interviewees identified the following skills students should possess by graduation: a deep knowledge of current trends and theories in digital media and mass communication; innovative methods of research; an ability to engage key audience, and a mastery of equipment and techniques used in multimedia journalism. Thus, the purpose of program is to provide the modern digital media industry with highly qualified competitive specialists with the latest knowledge and relevant skills which are necessary rapidly changing digital environment. IBSU (International Black Sea University) used the results of this applied research for the development of a new MA program on digital media, storytelling and communication that is according to modeled Loyola University Chicago's program.

## Notes

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### **Appendix 1. Main Discussions Questions for Semi-structured Interviews**

1. In your opinion, what should the main purpose for teaching journalism and mass communication at the master's level be?
2. In your opinion, what knowledge, skills, and competencies should graduate students have?
3. How do you think, is there a gap between university education and the modern media industry?
4. In your opinion, is there a shortage of specialists who possess the practical skills needed for digital media in the modern Georgian media labor market, as well as a shortage of media and communication researchers?
5. What is your opinion, how important is in-depth study of digital media?
6. How do you consider, what competencies and skills should graduates of the Master of Digital Media program possess?
7. The aim of this master's program is to train media and communication specialists, who, on the one hand, will have a deep and systematic knowledge of modern digital media trends, will have developed practical skills and at the same time will be equipped with basic communication theories, innovative forms and systems. I wonder, in your opinion, as an employer, does this goal meet the requirements of the modern Georgian labor market?
8. Do you think that this master's program in "Digital Media and Communications" should focus mainly on the practical component or is there also an important research component so that the graduate can continue his/her studies at the next level - doctoral program?
9. How often do you advertise vacancies? How many journalists have you hired over the last year?
10. Is having digital media and storytelling skills one of the main criteria in selection process?