Developing a responsive and adaptable emergent media curriculum

Dennis Owen Frohlich

Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, USA

David Magolis

Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, USA

ABSTRACT

The field of mass communication is constantly undergoing change and development, and the pace has accelerated with the advent of digital technologies. One challenge educators face is: how do we educate college students not just for today's careers, but also for lifelong competencies with media? Against this backdrop, the Department of Media and Journalism at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania sought a new curriculum to capitalize on "emergent media," that is, media that does not fit neatly into established mass communication disciplines such as journalism, telecommunications, public relations, and advertising. Our curriculum is centered around media literacy, skills development, and experiential learning. In this article, we discuss the theoretical backdrop for the curriculum, the structure of the curriculum, and the growth and future directions of our program. Now seven years into this curriculum, our experience can assist other educators in finding ways to make their curricula responsive and adaptable to a rapidly changing media environment.

Keywords: *digital media, emergent media, higher education, mass communication, media literacy*.

INTRODUCTION

While mass communications as a field has always been in flux, it is no secret that recent years have seen a rapid and prolific development of media platforms, practices, and technologies. One challenge educators face is: how do we educate college students not just for today's careers, but also for lifelong competencies with media? According to a World Economic Forum report (2016), the changing nature of the economy demands that businesses, governments, and individuals better prepare for future employment needs and skills requirements. The stigma of the university being too far removed from the professional world is real. Anybody who graduated with a mass communications degree, even five years ago, may be finding that the technology skills they learned are already outdated. Persistent and pervasive university bureaucracies add further stress to our desire to create curricula that can respond well to changes in industry and culture.

Numerous experts have studied the future of the mass communications field (e.g., Lingwall, 2002; Mensing, 2010; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012; Spyridou et al., 2013) and most could not foresee how quickly media skills and knowledge bases were becoming outdated by faster and better technologies. According to a Pew Research Center report (Walker, 2019), "Americans continue to be more likely to get news through mobile devices than through desktop or laptop computers. Roughly six-in-ten U.S. adults (57%) often get news this way, compared with 30% who often do so on a desktop or laptop computer." What can we do to ensure that students are learning the requisite technical skillset for employment while remaining thoughtful media producers without revamping our curricula every year?

We began by investigating what skills students will need to be competitive in their careers. The Partnership for 21st Century Learning, founded in 2002, is a collaboration between business leaders, educators, and policymakers that seeks to ready US K-12 students for success in this century. Their Framework for 21st Century Learning "was developed with input from educators, education experts, and business leaders to define and illustrate the skills, knowledge, expertise, and support systems that students need to succeed in work, life and citizenship" (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019). The framework identified skills necessary for effective citizenship, including many skills directly related to mass communications, including: information literacy, media literacy, and information, communications and technology (ICT)

literacy. Additionally, the framework identified "life and career skills" including flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, and social and cross-cultural skills, qualities directly applicable to any student of media.

While efforts to increase the media literacy of K-12 students are commendable and appropriate, the reality is that many students in higher education lack these skills as well. Students in the discipline of media and mass communications need media literacy skills more than ever if they are to be successful in their careers. According to the National Communication Association's (2015) Learning Outcomes in Communication, graduates of communication programs should know how to "critically analyze messages," and should be able to "articulate characteristics of mediated and non-mediated messages" and "recognize the influence of messages."

Against this backdrop, the Department of Media and Journalism at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania sought a new curriculum to capitalize on 'emergent media,' that is, media that does not fit neatly into established mass communication disciplines such as journalism, telecommunications, public relations, and advertising. We live in a technology and media-suffused environment characterized by: 1) access to an abundance of information, 2) rapid changes in technology tools, and 3) the ability to collaborate and make individual contributions on an unprecedented scale. To be effective in the 21st century, citizens and workers must be able to create, evaluate, and effectively utilize information, media, and technology. In this article, we discuss the theoretical backdrop for the curriculum, the structure of the curriculum, and the growth and future directions of our program. Now seven years into this curriculum, our experience can assist other educators in finding ways to make their curricula responsive and adaptable to a rapidly changing media environment.

The pressing need for media literacy

Over the past twenty years, media literacy – which is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate create, and act using all forms of communication (National Association for Media Literacy Education [NAMLE], 2019) – has been gaining support as an area of study due to the publicity of cyber safety, social media, public relations, computer scams, telecommunications, civics education, and following the 2016 US Presidential election, concerns about 'fake news' or as Wardle (2017) terms

it, misinformation and disinformation infecting the information ecosystem. Young people may spend substantial time every day using media, but time alone does not make one media literate. Ashley (2013) noted that a growing body of research "finds support for the idea that young people, while sometimes fluent in technologies used in and out of the classroom, often struggle to decipher media messages."

Colleges and universities are effectively positioned to offer media literacy education, being that they are the last step of formal education for many people (Cubbage, 2018). However, the relevancy of media literacy education goes far beyond journalism and media majors: media technologies are now ubiquitous in many fields and disciplines, making media literacy relevant for all students, regardless of major. College curricula, though, are often not suited to fostering a media literacy education. Schmidt (2013) argued that simply teaching about media is not the same as teaching media literacy. In a survey of both faculty and students, Schmidt found that while both parties agree that media literacy is important, there is a mismatch between what faculty believe they are teaching about media literacy, and what students are actually absorbing. He suggested that not only do faculty need to integrate media literacy more systematically into their courses, but need to more explicitly assess media literacy competencies to better evaluate the effectiveness of such a curriculum. In a study assessing the impact of a media literacy course, Schilder and Redmond (2019) found that after taking such a course, students asked significantly more complex questions about the media messages they saw, such as the production techniques used to create the messages, and questions about representation. The authors argued that "the increase in questions related to production techniques shows that media literacy education may lead to students and society becoming less susceptible to the potential influence of particularly manipulative propaganda that could impact our democracy at large" (p. 108).

While being able to decode media messages is important in its own right, what is the ultimate aim of teaching media literacy? As Hobbs (2010) notes, "[…] genuine educational change in K-12 and higher education does not come about simply by generating documents or developing written standards […] What is needed now is a clear and compelling vision of the instructional practices that can best support the development of these new competencies among all Americans" (p. 19-20). A media-literacy infused curriculum should not only ask students to analyze and evaluate different forms of media in each course, but also ask students to "produce and created media as well, encouraging their self-expression and participation in the popular discourses that animate our democracy" (Butler, Fuentes-Bautista, & Scharrer, 2018, p. 156). This production component is essential, as it allows the students to enter into larger media dialogues, and to put into practice skills that they have learned from an analytical perspective.

The vision for our program is to teach students how to be thoughtful consumers of media and competent producers of media for a variety of audiences. To be effective producers of media, we teach students how to think critically about the media they consume every day so that they can become responsible, ethical communicators in their own right. This focus on content creation is supported by the National Association for Media Literacy Education, which argues that media education "include[es] 'hands on' experiences and media production" and that the field is "dedicated to teaching the skills associated with media literacy" (2019).

The challenge for higher education is, how do we incorporate media literacy into an already packed curriculum? Our answer: we incorporated components of media literacy into every new course that we designed in our emergent media concentration. Rather than having media literacy relegated to a single course, we integrated media literacy across the curriculum, making the curriculum as a whole interconnected. What follows is our vision and development of an instructional practice that supports the inclusion of media literacy skills into a mass communications curriculum.

Curriculum structure

Before the establishment of the emergent media curriculum in 2012, our mass communications department had three tracks in traditional media disciplines: journalism, which offers courses in news writing and editing; public relations, which offers courses in tactics and strategies; and telecommunications, which offers courses in video production, broadcasting, and video editing. Digital media technologies have affected each of these concentration areas. For example, today's journalists do more than write and edit stories: they also edit videos and update news websites (Mullin, 2016). To bridge the concentration areas and serve as a way to integrate emerging technologies into an already diverse program, we developed an emergent media curriculum that would

expose our students to new technologies and help them think critically about media they produce and consume.

Courses

After discussions with our alumni who are currently working in various fields, including journalism, social media, web design, public relations, and content production, we identified the skills, abilities, and knowledge that their employers wanted in new hires. The current job market demands that applicants know how to: write, design and code websites, create and manipulate images, record and edit audio, create compelling social media posts, and design video games and interactive resources. Through regular consultation with alumni and industry professionals, we stay abreast of developments and needs in the media industry. For instance, throughout 2019 we conducted focus groups with alumni, and then distributed a survey to more than 100 alumni, asking them which skills are in demand, and how we can update our curriculum so that students are prepared for an evolving media industry. By consulting a multitude of sources for inspiration, we ensure that our curriculum effectively teaches the skills employers seek. Our curriculum includes the following six courses, which address these skills and abilities:

- MEDIA 120: Introduction to Emergent Media. Foundational course in media literacy that exposes students to current concerns with emergent media. Students learn to blog and write for social media.
- MEDIA 220: Introduction to Multimedia. Introductory course in web design. Students learn HTML and CSS coding and develop both a personal website and a website for a local client, such as a small business, church, non-profit, or student group. For a more detailed look at the development of the syllabus for this course, see: Frohlich, 2019
- MEDIA 260: Social Media and Podcasting: Course that examines how mediation affects communication, and how social media producers use their platforms to communicate with audiences. Students also create audio podcasts using open source software like Audacity.
- MEDIA 280: Introduction to Visual Communications. Course that introduces students to visual communication strategies with both practical and theoretical elements. Students learn about Photoshop and other image editing software and develop a visual brand.
- MEDIA 320: Applied Multimedia. Advanced web design course. Students build off what they learned in 220 to create websites using industry-standard web design, development, and social media promotion techniques.
- MEDIA 420: Emergent Media Workshop. Topical workshop class that can be adapted to current media needs. For example, in one version of the class students learned about video games, wrote blogs, and recorded videos analyzing game design. In another version, students learned about censorship of social media. The workshop can also be adapted to cover topics including app design, interactive design, and advanced projects that draw on all the skills learned in previous courses.

With the emergent media curriculum, we wanted to avoid the trap of thinking too narrowly about media disciplines, as the lines between journalism, telecommunications, public relations, advertising, and more are being blurred every day by adoption of digital technologies. Our curriculum has utility for students in these traditional disciplines, and can prepare students for the numerous digital media jobs that have been created in recent years related to web design, content production, and social media. The content outlines for each course are flexible enough to allow changes from year to year so that we expose students to current thinking and practices. For samples of course syllabi, see the first author's personal website: http://dennisfrohlich.com.

Sample assignments

Our goal with the curriculum was to incorporate media literacy throughout the courses. Each course tasks students with examining a variety of media messages to understand how the messages are produced and identify how the messages are adapted for different audiences. Then, students create their own media messages – in the forms of blogs, websites, social media posts, podcasts, infographics, posters, and more – with the goal of communicating with diverse audiences in effective and ethical ways. This approach has been advocated by other scholars. Campbell and Parr (2013) articulated this approach well by stating:

> Fully active literacy practices combine the three roles presented here: cracking the code of the text, making meaning from it by knowing what to do with it, and at the same time recognizing what the text can do to us and using this awareness to design and create new texts. These practices include exercising control over existing texts and creating our own powerful texts that

communicate by informing, entertaining, and inspiring without exploiting or silencing anyone (p. 139).

For instance, in Social Media and Podcasting, students are tasked with analyzing a variety of social media accounts, from a business' social media use to a non-profit's to a celebrity's and more. This analysis is expressed as a series of blog posts, where students learn not only how to express their thoughts using the language of media literacy (e.g., analyzing sources, messages, effects, and audiences), but also become more proficient in writing for a digital audience, incorporating hyperlinks, videos, social media posts, and other multimedia into their blogs.

In our two web design classes, students often critique other websites to discern out who the audiences are, how the websites are designed with specific users and audiences in mind, and what the purposes of the sites are. By thinking critically about websites as artifacts created with intentional objectives, students better understand their own purposes in creating websites. In the second web design class, students create and launch their own websites, promote the websites on specially-created social media accounts, and then add content to the site for the final month of the semester. Students are usually effective at evaluating other's web content; it becomes a bigger challenge to create their own websites targeted at specific audiences. These assignments help them anticipate the kinds of design challenges they will face in the working world.

In a special topic class called "Censorship and Consequences," students apply First Amendment law and ethical communication principles to various instances of social media controversies. Every week (or even every day), numerous people get in trouble for things they say, post, or do online. This can affect individuals with small followings as well as celebrities, politicians, or big businesses. Today's students spend ample time on social media, and regularly follow such controversies. In the class, students discuss these controversies, analyzing who said what and why certain audiences were offended, and debate what the appropriate consequences – socially or legally – should be. This course was designed so that when students encounter social media controversies in the future – as part of their career, as an individual, or as a bystander – they will have a variety of media literacy tools that they can apply to the situation.

In our Visual Communication class, students learn not just practical skills in image editing, such as with Photoshop or similar programs, but students also learn to critically evaluate visual information found in the news, advertisements, marketing materials, and other sources. Students then create their own visual brands, infographics, and other visual materials. Students are assessed not only on their technical skill, but also on the responsible use of imagery (such as the incorporation of diversity) and the ethical connotations of their work.

These assignments provide a look at some of the many ways in which media literacy is directly incorporated into our program. Regardless of the course, students often begin the semester by learning appropriate theoretical ideas, then applying these ideas to media artifacts, and finally crafting their own expressions of media.

Online teaching

We developed the courses for face-to-face and online formats. Because of the strong focus in skill development we limit most courses to 20 students. Our students respond well to personal interaction, and the limited class size allows us to provide frequent and detailed feedback regarding student work.

While back in 2012 our department had never taught an online course, we have since then offered more and more courses online. Through our courses, students (who, at our university, were not generally used to online education) have gotten more comfortable with taking courses online. As professors who teach online, we have sought out additional training and professional development opportunities offered through our university (such as seminars offered through our Teaching and Learning center), the state system (a 5-week online course in how to create effective online courses), and other organizations (for example, National Association of Media Literacy Education's materials and attending media literacy conferences) to further enhance our online courses. MEDIA 120: Introduction to Emergent Media is taught exclusively online at this point and because it is a 100-level course, it is a good starter course for students unfamiliar with online education.

As for the skills-based courses, especially MEDIA 220: Introduction to Multimedia and MEDIA 280: Introduction to Visual Communications, some students struggle with the online format, particularly the lab portion where we demonstrate how to code with HTML and CSS or edit images with Photoshop. Through detailed video tutorials and by making ourselves available during office hours, either face-to-face or online, we address student concerns and more

effectively teach these courses as time goes on. We show students how to download and configure software needed to complete their assignments (for example, text editors and Adobe Creative Cloud) and our department has two computer labs students can use on campus. In some of our online courses, we have required students to meet with us during office hours two times a semester. We have found that this decreases the distance between instructor and student and helps them feel better connected to the class. Online meetings happen through Zoom, a video platform that allows the instructor to video chat, share screens, and provide live software demonstrations to students. Our university has a site license for all students and faculty, which makes it easy for instructors to arrange digital meetings.

General education

An important consideration when designing the new Emergent Media curriculum was our university's general education program. We felt that these courses were relevant not just for mass communication students, but students of all majors. We met with our college dean, current and former department chairs, and members of the General Education Committee to see how this new curriculum could be accepted and utilized throughout the university. Through these meetings we heard repeatedly that our curriculum was not only new, but desirable across campus because of the skills and knowledge contained in our courses. Three of our emergent media courses carry general education points – such as points in Technological and Information Literacy, Arts & Humanities, and Citizenship.

Designing many of our courses to fit the general education structure provides our program with many benefits, including that it serves as a de facto recruiting tool. Since our courses are open to all students, which helps us fill seats in an increasingly competitive university environment, many students take an emergent media class hoping merely to knock off another general education requirement, but then get hooked on media and want more. This gives us the ability to recruit those students to our major or minor. To further this potential we aggressively market the program to undeclared students, or students who are interested in technology but are unsure as to what they would like to do. Because our courses fulfill general education requirements, students do not "waste" credits by trying out our classes. Often times, after taking one or two of our general education classes, students decide that they want to major or minor in the program.

These two components – online course offerings coupled with general education credits – not only helps us meet students' needs, but also has enabled us to forge partnerships with other majors and minors on campus. For instance, our nursing program, which is one of the most time-intensive majors, requires nursing students to work long hours in their clinical rotations at the hospital. During these rotations students are also taking courses and it can be difficult to find classes that fit into their clinical schedule. Our online general education courses serve nursing students well and each semester we devote one section of MEDIA 120: Introduction to Emergent Media to nursing majors.

We also have success with students who are actively enrolled in the military. They, too, desire the flexibility of online courses, enjoy the curriculum content, and appreciate completing their general education courses. General education courses that are available online are the perfect option for students who are busy, work full- or part-time, commute to campus, need flexibility with their class schedule, and need to complete their general education requirements.

Emergent media minor

In addition to a new concentration area within the mass communications major, we also developed an 18-credit emergent media minor. Many careers demand media and technology literacy skills. Almost every business, non-profit, and government agency, for example, needs a website and social media presence. Our curriculum meets a need not only for traditional mass communications careers – like journalist, reporter, social media manager, and advertiser – but for careers of all stripes. We position the emergent media minor as a relevant complement to other majors on campus, from business to marketing to communication studies to the sciences.

Media already fully enmeshes every college student's life – considering the ubiquity of the internet, smartphones, and social media – so students from other majors are naturally drawn to the emergent media minor.

For example, we had one student who majored in biology and was particularly invested in educating the public about climate change. Her science background gave her the necessary foundation for this topic and she learned through the emergent media minor how to communicate with digital audiences. Other students are in majors that have a strong emphasis on theorizing and paper writing, which is of great value, but they also

crave practical skills that they can point to in interviews and job applications. Students realize right away that the study of emergent media can help them parlay their major into a viable career.

Working across concentrations

About the same time this curriculum was developed, our department underwent another significant change: the traditional tracks or concentration areas were softened. In other words, students were no longer "locked" into their specific track. Every student is required to take the foundational course in each of the four tracks, as this provides them a strong education in multiple forms of media. From there, they are free to stay within their concentration, or they can cross concentrations. A journalism student could take classes in public relations and an emergent media student could take classes in telecommunications. Some students even take advanced courses in all four tracks. This significant change allows students to prepare for exactly the career they want and to seek out the necessary skills to make their career goals a reality. We have had many students who are formally in a different track, but then end up taking just as many, if not more, courses in the emergent media track.

To help students make good decisions about their coursework, personal advising is necessary. Our department does very well in tracking students' degree and course completion, and making sure that students do not forget about required major courses or general education courses. Furthermore, our department is relatively unique on campus in that students are not allowed to register themselves for their mass communication courses: they must stop in for advising first. Part of the reason for this is to keep seats for our majors, given that we have limited faculty and want to make sure that our majors get the first shot at enrolling in our courses.

The natural benefit to this system is that all advisors meet with their advisees at least once a semester to discuss course enrollment for the next semester. Students change their minds often about what they want to do with their careers: some of our students change concentrations every year!

Through this personal advising, we can keep tabs on each student's interests and steer them toward courses – be they in emergent media or in other tracks – that will most benefit the student.

Early successes and future growth

Now in our seventh year, we currently serve 27 majors and 38 minors, have graduated 63 majors and 123 minors from Spring 2014-Spring 2019, and have served well over a thousand more who have taken our courses for general education credit. We began with one full-time faculty member, then added a second, and now have a third faculty member who teaches, in part, in this area. We have also had a need for adjunct professors to meet demand. Emergent media is the only concentration in the program offering courses all year round, including winter and summer courses. While we are not the biggest concentration in our department (that distinction goes to telecommunications) we frequently have students in other tracks taking our courses.

Two emergent media courses that have proven popular are MEDIA 220: Introduction to Multimedia and MEDIA 280: Introduction to Visual Communications. Students in the other tracks realize that they need web design and Photoshop skills and they leave our classes with newfound confidence to expand their technology repertoire. Likewise, students in emergent media often take courses from other concentrations, such as Online Journalism or Video Editing, as these courses naturally complement the emergent media offerings.

Our program has seen many of its first graduates beginning careers in media. One student developed a large following on social media with a sports podcast while he was in school and he leveraged that audience to gain a career in sports radio. One of our minors used her skills in social media and web design to start a career in social media marketing for an eye clinic. A student working for a regional food distributor used the skills she learned in our web design courses to completely redesign the company's website. Another recent graduate utilized her emergent media skills to start her own business freelancing in web and graphic design. She has worked with several major clients including Aramark. Every day our students are out in the field doing great work, and we now bring them back to campus as alumni to tell current students about what they learned and how our program prepared them for their careers.

The next phase of the emergent media program is to launch an emergent media certificate. We are targeting both people who have worked in the media industry for several years and people who already have their mass communications degree. Many media professionals are finding that, after a few years on the job, their skillset is

already becoming out of date. Some graduates did not have the opportunity to take the kind of courses we offer, especially if their school locked them into a traditional mass communication track. Because our courses are fully online, we are hoping the 18-credit concentration will appeal to students across the state and country. We have conducted focus groups with industry professionals to ensure that a certificate in emergent media would help industry professionals get ahead in their careers.

Developing an emergent media curriculum that is relevant, practical, and impactful has taken a lot of work, and maintaining it and keeping it current will be another challenge. However, such a curriculum is needed in the mass communications field, and we hope that our experiences are helpful to other programs looking to adapt their curricula to the modern media environment.

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