

IS J-SCHOOL WORTH IT?
EVALUATING CONVERGENCE STUDENTS' PREPARATION
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM
ANALYSIS

With the rapid growth of digital technology, media watchers often see “convergence” as the present and future of today’s journalism profession. Knowing how to write and edit no longer seems to be enough, and journalists must also know how to shoot video, edit audio and basically be a jack-of-all-trades. Journalism schools seem to be one, if not the only, path to learn these skills and achieve success in the industry.

But are journalism schools teaching the skills their students need to be successful? And in the rush to teach convergence, are key journalism skills being overlooked? The answer, according to 11 graduates from the University of Missouri’s School of Journalism, is mixed.

The 11 graduates in this qualitative study live and work around the United States. Although some are now in public relations or other fields, all studied converged media at Missouri sometime between 2005 (the start of the J-School’s convergence program) and 2010. Not all were Convergence Sequence majors, but all had taken at least one convergence course while at Mizzou.

Despite differences in careers or graduation year, each offered a similar perspective that the J-School prepared them well with a basic skillset to land their

first jobs and the ability to improve upon these skills. But several also mentioned having to teach themselves some basic skills that no journalist should graduate from school without.

J-School Skills

In each interview, graduates described a variety of skills they felt the Missouri School of Journalism taught them. Some mentioned specific software and basic journalism techniques they had learned, while others described conceptual skills or skills they valued that wouldn't necessarily be considered specific to journalism education or the profession.

AS₁, a 2007 Convergence Sequence graduate, said the completeness of the program was the greatest professional value to her. She was particularly glad she learned convergence software, such as Flash, Avid and Audition as well as the basics of photography and how to make infographics. But she also included teamwork as another important skill set learned at Mizzou.

“One thing I thought was really useful with convergence was working in teams and sharing ideas and learning how to come together to work on a story, instead of just working on your own ideas and doing everything by yourself,” AS₁ said. “I think that has been a skill that has stayed with me and helped a lot in what I do now.”

TK, a 2005 broadcast graduate, learned how to use a content management system, as well as FinalCut and Avid, but seemed most thankful to have learned “the thought processes and approach to storytelling for news.”

The technological focus may be what sets the Convergence Sequence apart from the rest of the J-School tracks, but journalism basics and broader concepts were what several considered their key skill sets.

MS, a 2009 Convergence Sequence graduate, said she learned how to write, shoot video, take photos and record audio when she was at the journalism school. The first skills she mentioned in her interview, however, were identifying what makes a good story and how to pitch it well. AR, a 2005 news/editorial graduate, said research skills were key to her experience, specifically an investigative reporting class. AR also considered reporting a valuable skill, as well as how to relocate as a journalist.

“Going into a new town and having to build sources and relationships and learn the lay of the land — I feel like those are skills I gained at Mizzou,” AR said.

MM, a 2006 news/editorial graduate, said she learned a lot about reporting, but also about the “concept of convergence news” and knowing how news works. MM’s first job out of the journalism school was reporting for a radio news service in Washington, D.C. She used a typical day on the job as an example of what she learned at Mizzou: “So the reporting skills, knowing what’s going on, knowing what the leadership needs to be asked, following the political angles of it. Knowing who

the other reporters are, who the other radio reporters are, knowing how to get my sound bite and things like that, that was stuff I learned from journalism school.”

The value of convergent-storytelling skills varied. Most agreed that Mizzou had addressed the basics of storytelling well, but one graduate wasn’t satisfied. MS, now a freelance multimedia journalist in New York City, enjoyed the autonomy of the Convergence Sequence but regretted not being fully versed on in-depth reporting. She felt that she lacked a certain “reporting rigor” that other, non-multimedia journalists seemed to have and wished she had received a better education in basic reporting skills: “We just spent so much (expletive) time sitting around and talking about where new journalism was going. And now I just feel like that was probably a waste of time. Like we could have been learning ... It just changes anyway.”

J-School courses

Often, the graduates brought up specific classes they thought were effective in teaching them their skills, as well as some that were less so. TK said the best class he took in the J-School was “Journalism and Conflict,” which taught him the art of negotiation. He also said he “refused to learn” tape editing in one course because he thought it was “archaic.” One program in particular, Avid, was viewed as out-of-date by several. The computer-assisted reporting class was also mentioned by a few graduates both as an important class and skill that seemed unique to the J-School.

Some did not think the theory classes were worthwhile. AH, a 2011 Master’s graduate who began studying convergence in 2005, was one who enjoyed the

journalism theory classes. She now works in IT for a Washington, D.C. publication and said she often has to “bridge the gap” between tech-speak and journalism-speak.

“But whenever I can talk to the editorial people about journalism and why this is how it is and where we came from as a culture, that really helps me ... build some credibility that I kind of know what I’m talking about,” AH said.

Although theory and non-practical classes were disliked or seen as pointless by some, the graduates still acknowledged the importance of a shared basic understanding of journalism ethics and principles in the industry. MM has no use for reporting skills in her current PR job, but she values knowing how news works, and MS appreciated the integrity and “sense of duty” to a journalistic code the school provided her. Working as a multimedia journalist for nonprofits, MS said without the journalism background it would be easy to be swayed by an organization’s wants.

“It’s not about raising money. It’s not about making someone look good... There’s a purpose behind what I do,” MS said “I’m glad that really struck me and dug deep within me while I was at the J-School. Because I carried that on. And I don’t think I’ll ever lose it.”

Each also mentioned classes that, in hindsight, they wish they had taken or the J-School had offered. More than one graduate believed a self-marketing or branding class and a journalism business class would have been worthwhile as students and helpful in their present careers or immediately after graduation. TK

thought the business component of journalism is something Mizzou needs to work on.

“There’s a real lack in the fundamentals of business coming out of ... (the journalism school). I don’t know if it’s gotten better,” TK said. “It amazes me on the Mizzou listserv when people say ‘well, how much should I charge?’ Like, come on, you should (know) that; you should be aware of what your worth is.”

A few also expressed interest in a social media course or some coding instruction. JM, a 2009 Convergence Sequence graduate, wished for both. Now a PR/marketing coordinator in New York City, JM said it would have made her transition from college to career much smoother.

“I think in all honesty, everyone can benefit from learning some basic HTML skills, Web CSS skills,” JM said. “The world is digital now. ... The more you know how to code, the more you open up your skill set and open up your job prospects.”

Into the real world

After Mizzou, first careers varied, depending on classroom experience and professional goals. Several worked in some type of newsroom environment before finding their niche elsewhere or having to find different work due to a shrinking market: MS worked as multimedia producer and editor for a national daily before transitioning to multimedia work for nonprofits, and ER’s first job was as a videographer for a St. Louis university where she was also pursuing a dual masters in the medical field.

AS₂, a 2008 Convergence Sequence graduate, worked as a multimedia journalist in North Carolina and left the broadcast industry after her two-year contract was up. She now works in online communications for St. Louis college. JM used her social media skills — Twitter, specifically — to transition from a brand journalist/marketing coordinator to a digital PR position for an advertising agency in New York City. Just one graduate, AS₁, remains at the same publication more than four years later. She began as a multimedia producer for a Wisconsin daily but now focuses solely on entertainment for the publication.

No one said their job search was hindered by their studies at the J-School, though the burden of student loans was occasionally mentioned. One even said her journalism school experiences made them overqualified for her first job: AH's first job out of college was working as a night Web editor for a large Texas daily. As amazing an opportunity as it sounds for a recent grad, AH was unenthusiastic about the work she did there.

"It was something that I think someone my age was a great candidate for," AH said. "I came with the skill set that just blew the hiring managers and the person who trained me — it blew them away."

Not all looked back fondly on their time at Mizzou. TC said she was frustrated by her graduate experience, felt unprepared and called her time at the J-School "discombobulating." TC entered the graduate program without any prior journalism experience and said she continued to feel clueless throughout her time there. TC used her first job at an alternative paper to teach herself AP Style and is teaching

herself Photoshop and Illustrator via online tutorials for her current PR job at a Michigan school district. As strange as it sounds that one could graduate with a journalism degree and not learn AP Style, TC maintains she never learned it fully after dropping an editing class.

One graduate in a hiring position spoke of how a formal journalism education from Mizzou let her know potential candidates had a certain skill level. GR said Missouri students “stand apart by miles” and that they don’t need to be taught the basics, the “little things” journalists may take for granted. The little things are more than “just knowing how to write,” GR said. “It’s about knowing how to communicate and fit into a professional environment. You’d be surprised how some of these people come in and don’t function well in an office. And this is coming from someone who freelanced for a year and worked by myself from the couch.”

Recommendations for improvement

Regardless of their experiences, skill sets and present jobs, the 11 graduates had a largely positive impression of their education at Mizzou on themselves and within the industry. And despite some classes they wish they took or ones they disliked, all expressed the same basic opinion that Mizzou gave them the tools they needed to become successful. Armed with a foundational skill set, these graduates continued to learn and to expand their knowledge, to make themselves more marketable in journalism and other industries.

Still, the Missouri Method could be perfected. Required courses in basic coding would greatly help some convergence journalism students, increasing their

skill set and worth in the job market. Courses on freelance marketing and self-branding and promotion would also be extremely useful. Most journalists turn to freelance at some point in their careers, whether to make a living or for extra income, and a class or a few sessions on freelance basics would go far in many journalists' careers.

An evaluation of the Convergence Sequence at the J-School is also needed. Several were convergence graduates when it was a new program, but no student should be able to graduate from any journalism school without knowing AP Style or feeling they lacked a certain "reporting rigor." Making the sequence more streamlined with more step-by-step required courses could ensure Convergence Sequence students don't graduate without knowing these key basic skills (or at least can't take the next class until they have mastered important journalism fundamentals).

Evaluations of convergence students a year or two after graduation would also help determine what software students should learn how to use. Several graduates called *Avid* outdated even while they were in school. If the program was already outdated in the real world, it should have been phased out or not taught at the J-School. Post-graduate evaluations would also allow Mizzou to see where instruction in some skills or principles are weak in the Convergence Sequence and allow the school to make adjustments sooner rather than later.

The J-School should also consider combining the print/digital sequence with convergence. As these graduates have explained, today's journalists have to know

how to do it all: How to write and edit, as well as how to shoot video, record audio, and take pictures, among many other skills. Removing this label, which creates a mental divide and indicates that one type of journalist writes and another works with multimedia, would go a long way in getting students to understand the varied skill set they need to be successful.

A separate convergence label also seems to indicate a lesser amount of instruction in essential journalism skills. Good writing and reporting is key in all aspects of journalism, whether on paper or tape. Just because one is learning about new technology and video storytelling does not mean they should have a lesser understanding of the principles of journalism, as some graduates suggested happened to them.

Missouri's learning-by-doing method seems to be the key to graduates' success. Skills are taught and improved upon in an environment conducive to education — and one where mistakes can be made and learned from. In a job, the environment may not be so welcoming to novices, and mistakes can cost one their job. This learning-by-doing method is then carried over into journalists' careers, where they continue to teach themselves the skills they need to be successful. With a few tweaks, the Missouri School of Journalism will be worth it for all aspiring journalists.