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The Media Convergence Blog Project

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The Media Convergence Blog Project

Overview

This project is one of two major projects students complete in a Writing and Design for Digital Media class. In this lesson, I provide the project overview, rationale, assignment description, and teaching materials. This project can be incorporated into various media studies courses in mass communications, online journalism and digital humanities at the sophomores and junior levels.

The goal of this lesson is to introduce media convergence and explore how media convergence blurs various social, institutional, and cultural boundaries. In this project, students explore a range of topics related to media convergence, such as the changes in journalism due to digital convergence, the critical evaluation of sources on social media platforms, media consolidation, copyright in the digital age, surveillance on social media, and digital inequality. In order to integrate these critical concepts into digital media practice, students' media experiences are used as a fulcrum to explore the issues of media convergence. Questions students have in regards to their media use, be they the "binge-worthiness" of Netflix shows or cell-phone use rules when dating, are broadened into a critical exploration in conversation with the instructor and their classmates in this project. Students identify and analyze contemporary media issues in relation to their own media use; they write their own analyses and reports, referring to academic and professional sources. Furthermore, in order to help students converse about media convergence, this lesson provides hands-on training in Wordpress and digital media technology. In other words, students develop a range of digital media skills while blogging about contemporary issues of media convergence.

The Media Convergence Blog Project also helps students develop practical skills in digital media making and the ability to critically analyze practices in the media industry. The project is structured so that lectures and activities explore media industry practices, and at the same time provide training in the skills journalists and media professionals need in relation to digital technologies. This lesson uses Wordpress because it is the most common blogging platform, relatively easy to set up and run, and offers various themes and tools. Students create an account, learn the tools and themes, and report their findings about media convergence at the site. In other words, this project encourages students to engage in critical media analysis and critical media making focusing on their own digital media use. This way, theory and practice in digital media is practiced in balanced and integrated ways.

Rationale

Young people's participation on social media platforms by blogging, remixing existing music, repurposing television shows for YouTube videos, and "messing around" with digital technology has given rise to a burgeoning Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media movement. Educators should engage in this critical media making given that 1) young people are voluntarily dedicating much of their time to learning it (Kafai and Peppler 2010), and 2) these processes offer possibilities for producing collective meaning "to reflect on and intervene in systems of power" (Reitsamer and Zobl 2014, 330). Yet, historically, media studies classes often emphasize critical media analyses over media production (Kafai and Peppler 2010). Likewise, students do not often critically

reflect upon their media experience, despite their always-on access to digital media, as Turkle (2008) observes. When students binge-watch Netflix shows, tweet about sports games, listen to Spotify, follow YouTube make-up tutorials, or use Tinder for dating, rarely do they question media industry practices.

Media convergence is often defined as "the coming together of all forms of mediated communications in an electronic, digital form driven by computers" (Pavlik 1996, 132). But in 2017, many students have not watched over-the-air television programs, or used a landline phone or stand-alone computer; they have difficulty grasping the blurring boundaries between media (de Sola Pool 1983). Early scholars of media convergence tend to emphasize technology itself. They point out that media convergence spills out to regulatory practices and delivery networks leading to a frenzy of media consolidation among media outlets, especially after the Telecommunications Act of 1996 (McChesney 1999; Mueller 1999).

However, media researchers have also pointed out that media convergence is not only a technologically driven top-down industry process, but also a bottom-up consumer-driven cultural practice (Pavlik and McIntosh 2004; Jenkins 2004). Analysis of blurring boundaries between production and consumption and the remixing of previously distinct media forms, has burgeoned in media scholarship on "participatory culture," "sharing culture," and "web 2.0 culture." Scholarship on DIY media has focused on a variety of critical media making, such as YouTube parodies and activist videos (Reitzamer and Zobl 2014), video gamers creating their own gameplay on YouTube using the machinima.com platform (Lowood 2006; Postigo 2014), young people repurposing popular media culture content for marginalized causes and writing for feminist zines (Chidgey 2014).

Students' digital media experiences such as writing blogs, watching Netflix and producing parody videos offer entry points to exploring the changes in media industries. This lesson uses students' direct experience as a springboard for learning by combining it with reflective observation and conceptualization (Baasanjav 2013; Kolb 1984). Through the Convergence Media Blog project, students explore issues like media concentration, surveillance, cross media ownership, audience fragmentation and privacy through research and reflecting upon their own media uses and practices, and reporting their findings.

DIY media, in some cases, has developed as a resistant stance to consumerist capitalism and corporate media: people or a group of people reclaim their power by creating and making their own media (Chidgey, 2014). Feminist zines are an example of this approach; this DIY perspective is attuned to collective identity formation, collaboration and skill-sharing (Chidgey, 2014; Reitzamer and Zobl 2014). Following this DIY or Do-It-Together (DIT) ethos, this project asks students to work together and learn how to learn from each other. These higher orders of learning are necessary for digital media making, given students' varied levels of technological preparedness and the rapid pace and multifaceted nature of digital technology changes.

Timeline

The Media Convergence Blog Project is carried out over seven weeks of a fifteen-week semester. The project is structured into the following phases:

1. Proposal and initiation of a blog (weeks 1-3)
2. Research and blog development (weeks 3-6)
3. Students share/present (week 7)

In the proposal phase, students develop a proposal for media convergence research and initiate their blog space at Wordpress. Students are paired with a partner and together they select a research topic related to media convergence. They are also introduced to media convergence issues and challenges in the media industry through lectures, readings, and videos, discussed in the following pages. Various lectures, and readings help students identify, refine, research and report the media convergence topics as listed in the Teaching Materials section.

I approve the proposals and provide feedback. Then students collaborate on their research paper and practice on the Wordpress.com site, researching their topic and reporting their findings on the blog. In class, we discuss how to report research findings in interrelated and sequential posts on blogs, and students develop their own guidelines on presenting their research findings on blog. The rule of thumb is students create 3-4 blog posts each answering some areas of the research questions they posed about media convergence. Furthermore, the textbook, class lectures and walkthrough practices in class help students explore questions such as "How to build an audience for your blog?" and "What are some techniques that help you to increase the search engine and internet visibility of your sites?"

In week 7, each pair makes a presentation sharing what they researched, what they discovered, and what they posted on their blogs.

Detailed Assignment Instructions

In the Media Convergence Blog Project, students work in pairs and complete the project in two sequenced assignments.

This assignment uses the textbook *Journalism Next: A Practical Guide to Digital Reporting and Publishing* (Briggs 2016) to help students select topics, build case studies and practice hands-on digital media skills. In the beginning of the project, lectures introduce students to the topics of 1) Media Convergence & Digital Media Literacy (Lecture 1) and 2) Blogs, Characteristics and Writing for Blog (Lecture 2). Other readings that supplement the textbook and lectures and are helpful in understanding media convergence include Henry Jenkins' (2004) "The Cultural Logic of Digital Convergence," Sherry Turkle's (2008) "Always-on/Always-on-you: The Tethered Self" and the New York Times article "Days of Our Digital Lives" by Stephens-Davidowitz (2015).

We also view and discuss the short video "How Does the Internet Work" by Data Center Canada (2011), and the documentaries "Generation Like" by PBS (2014) and "Inside Google" by National Geographic (2012). These videos and documentaries help the students to engage in critical discussions about digital media industries and cultures. Furthermore, since the assignment intertwines theory and practice, and is in a non-traditional blog writing form, I try to clarify the expectations of the assignment by providing students with the rubrics for grading (included below).

Assignment 1: Media Convergence Research Proposal and Blog Initiation

In the first assignment, Media Convergence Research Proposal and Blog Initiation, students identify research topics and pose research questions immediately relevant to media convergence. During the first week of the class, the instructor introduces the definitions and terms of media convergence (Lecture 1), and asks students to identify a digital media issue they want to explore more deeply. Then the instructor pairs students up and asks them to scan the textbook for topics relating to the blurring practices between media production and consumption.

Initial topics suggested to students include, but are not limited to, "Media convergence history and changes in the media industry," "Mobile media, immediacy and credibility of sources," "Crowdsourcing, online collaboration and media outlets," "Digital photography, mashups, and copyright law," "Google, search engines and privacy," and "Digital content, television and streaming."

In the second week of the class, the instructor lectures on blogs, their characteristics, and writing for blogs (Lecture 2).In class, students also initiate a collaborative blog space at Wordpress.com blog site by following the instructions (Handout 1) with their partners. Then students brainstorm research questions together and the instructor helps students to develop their experience-based questions into the critical inquiries of media convergence. For instance, the question of binge-worthiness of a Netflix show can be broadened into a research question focusing on the shifting nature of audience.

Then students refine and modify their introduction and research questions at home and create a post (around one page or 250 words) describing the topic, explaining why they are interested in the topic and posing questions they will answer in the research. The instructor approves the topic of research.

In addition to media convergence lectures and discussions, every week some class time is dedicated to hands-on skills development. These sessions are necessary given the varied levels of students' technological preparedness. I provide walkthrough instructions and worksheets on Setting Up a Wordpress Blog (Handout 1), Creating Posts and Pages (Handout 2), and Using Widgets and Tools (Handout 3) to students.

Assignment 2: Convergence Research Blog and Presentation

Once the proposal is approved and the blog initiated, students work on the second assignment, the Convergence Research Blog and Presentation, which is designed to help students connect their media experiences to critical issues of media convergence. Students are expected to demonstrate that they answered their initial research questions and related their topics to the class readings and other academic sources (5-6 sources). They are also encouraged to explicate their media experiences through analysis of case studies and refer to sources that explain how media convergence works. Communicating research findings onto blog posts is often new experience for students, and we discuss in class how they can creatively do so. Since guidelines are few, a rule of thumb is that students create around 3-4 blog posts, each of which answers an aspect of

the research question they pose. Each post is approximately 1-1.5 pages long. In total students write around 750-1000 words in several blog posts.

My students, for example, have explored the "cord-cutting" or the switching from cable to streaming services in projects "Chicks Talk Netflix," and "The Convergence between Television and Streaming Services." These groups explored the programming packages and the subscription model of the cable industry and compared them with new streaming services available on the internet like Netflix and Hulu. Students explored the various models of subscription, advertising, and program packaging in the media industry while conducting the research. Research topics and case studies change each semester around current events; yet recurring themes of media convergence such as the ethical issues of online journalism, the collection of personal information by Google, the struggle for online privacy, and the transformation of television, are explored by students based on their media experience (see students' blogs by clicking the links provided).

While working on the research, students also practice using digital media tools at the Wordpress.com site: they incorporate images, audios, tweets and videos; they link their sources and other prominent blogs; they design menus, create web pages and blogrolls; and they modify the appearances and the layouts of Wordpress themes. I provide students with the following handouts on using tools and widgets at Wordpress.com and students use these skills in their projects. This way the convergence skill sets are intertwined into the theoretical exploration of the critical issues of media convergence. At the end of the Media Convergence Blog Project, all pairs present their findings in class followed by Q & A sessions. During these presentations, students listen to each other, learn by participating, and share "skills" they learned in the spirit of the DIY "media maker" movement.

Handout 1: Setting-up a WordPress.com Account

First you need to set up an account. I recommend that you create one core account for both of you (you can manage several blogs with one account). You will need to do the following:

- Sign up and create a new wordpress.com blog by filling out the sign-up form at Wordpress by providing the email address, user name, password, and the URL address of your blog.
- Get a user name. It is likely that most common user names are already taken. You need to be creative.
- Provide a password. Create a strong password that you can remember, using some symbols, numbers, and upper and lower case letters.
- Get a blog address. This will become the URL (remember, Uniform Resource Locator?) for your site. This will be the address you put into your address bar, when you want to visit the site. In general, the URL will look like this: yourblogname.wordpress.com.
- Read and agree to terms of service and activate the blog. Wordpress.com will send you an email so that you can activate your account.

Once you created an account, you can sign into your account and do any of the following:

- Edit your blog title and add a tagline.
- Choose a theme. The theme is what defines how your site will look. Wordpress.com has free and premium themes.
- Create blog posts. You will probably land at the wordpress.com front-end dashboard.

Handout 2: The WordPress.com Dashboard

A WordPress blog or website has two main parts: a front end seen by the public when they visit your site, and a dashboard or back end where you write your articles, post photos and videos, and control the look and functionality of the site.

There are several ways to access the WordPress.com dashboard. If you are logged into WordPress.com and on the front end, you can simply go to "My Sites" and then select "WP Admin" to get to the dashboard. You can also go to the address bar and put in your URL/wp-admin, for example, chessstream.wordPress.com/wp-admin.

The dashboard consists of 1) a toolbar on the left and 2) the main area on the right-hand side. The dashboard shows all your content management tools: posts, media, links, pages, comments, and feedback. The Dashboard also has the application management section, where you modify the appearances, users, tools, and settings.

Posts and pages

WordPress has two main types of content: posts and pages. Posts are those frequently updated information that appear at the top of the front page. Posts are organized by date, author, categories and tags. Pages, on the other hand, are to inform the visitor about the site. Pages are usually made available through menus.

Creating and editing posts

Posts can be created from the WordPress.com front end and from the WordPress.com dashboard. You can simply click the "New Post" button on the WordPress.com toolbar.

You can also create a new post at the dashboard. Go to "Posts" in the side bar and then select Add New. This will open the post editor. Give your post a title, categories and tags that will be help your blog be indexed by search engines like Google. Here you also have the "Save Draft" and "Preview" options. Save Draft will permanently save your content and get a permalink that has the date the post was published on, and also the slug, which is the text version of the title. You can change any of the elements and delete elements by moving it to Trash, update the post, or change things like the publish date.

Handout 3: Adding Media and Using Widgets

Adding Media

You can embed external media such as a Youtube video or a tweet directly into your blog post at WordPress. Place the cursor where you want the tweet or video to appear.

Locate the tweet you want to post and click the timestamp. Then you will be taken to the page for that individual tweet. Copy the URL in the address bar:

https://twitter.com/wordpressdotcom/status/6325828846547517

Paste the URL on a line by itself in your Visual editor. You will see a preview of the tweet in the Visual Editor. The same thing happens with a YouTube video. Copy the URL, paste it in anywhere, where you want it to display. When you paste it in, it becomes a link, and that tweet or a video will appear.

Using Widgets

Depending on the theme you chose, you will have different "widgetized" areas most commonly found in sidebars, or footers. Wordpress.com offers many different widgets, which are controlled from the Widgets panel. To edit the widgets in your sidebar or in your footer, you first need to go to the Dashboard>Appearance>Widgets.
Most themes come with already activated widgets. Common widgets are a search widget, an archives widget, a meta widget and a Twitter Timeline widget.

If you want to create a search box on top, you need to add the search widget. Search a widget and place the widget into a widgetized area.

If you want to add a Twitter timeline to your sidebar, you do the following:

1. Search the Twitter Timeline widget, and place it where you want it to appear.
2. Customize the widget. Enter the widget ID, the long number found in the URL of your widgets configuration page. Copy the long number and paste it in the ID box. You can change the colors, the layout options and the width of the Twitter widget.
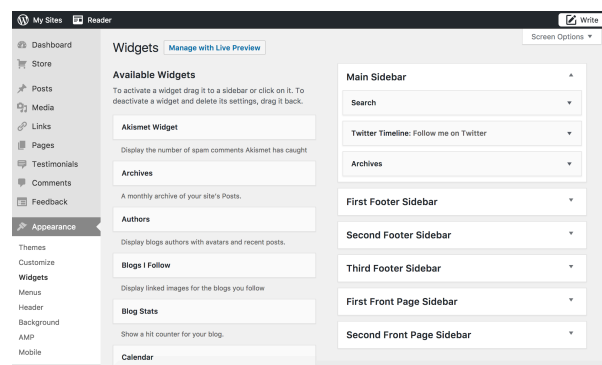
Lecture 1: Media Convergence and Digital Media Literacy

- What are some characteristics of the internet which change/challenge legacy media and journalism?
- How does the Internet work?

Media Convergence

Pavlik (1996) defines:

"coming together of all forms of communication in electronic, digital form driven by computers"

Refers to the blurring boundaries among
- Print media (newspapers and books)
- Telecommunications services (phone and mobile)
- Broadcast media (radio and television)
- Computers and online services

Convergence (Cont'd)

- Digital convergence (text, audio & video)
  - Pandora, Last.fm, and iTunes
  - Hulu, NetFlix and YouTube
  - Blogs, RSS and various news services--Twitter
- Convergence in delivery mechanisms and consolidation among media organizations:
  - Microsoft and NBC
  - CNN & AOL
  - Verizon and Comcast
  - Google (search engine Chrome, Youtube, maps)

Communicator's/ Journalist's Job

Journalism is about people, not technology
- Re-defined journalism
  - Expected to do more with fewer resources
  - Collaboration (open source, crowdsourcing)
  - Bottom-up journalism instead of top-down: *Huffington Post*, *TechCrunch*, *West Seattle Blog* etc.
  - Need for earlier adoptions of various technologies
  - Interactive, and transparent journalism
  - Pro-am journalism

Terminology & Digital Literacy

- The units of information: kilo, mega, giga, tera, peta, exa, zetta, yotta
- Internet is not the WWW:
  - WWW does not have email, IM and FTP
  - Web address, IP address, domain names
- Browsers: Firefox, Safari, Chrome
- Plug-ins and API
- Real Simple Syndications (RSS)

Information Units

- Unit of information: bits and bytes
- Information measuring units:
  - kilo, mega, giga, tera, peta, exa, zetta, yotta
  - Word documents are in KB, music and video files in MB
- File size matters:
  - Big files slow download (A 100 MB movie file takes several seconds depending on an Internet connection)
  - Web server space is needed to store and stream (1 Terabyte hard drive costs $150 nowadays)

Browsers

- Search information on web servers
- Present information on your device
- Browsers: Firefox, Safari, Chrome & Internet Explorer
  - Stores browsing history: Cache
    - Clear browsing history often
  - Presents other files with plug-ins, adds-ons

How the Internet works?

Data Center Canada video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5oe63pOhLI

Web and IP Addresses

- Each computer connected to the Internet gets an Internet Protocol address (IP address) like 209.131.36.158
- Each web server is known by a web address or Uniform Resource Locator (URL address); i.e. www.google.com
- Special computers called Domain Name Servers (DNS) translates URL addresses into IP addresses and requests resources from the requested location

RSS

- Real Simple Syndications (RSS)
- Pushes feed from a site or blog to your reader
- Sett RSS feeds:
  - Needs a reader: NetNewsWire
  - Subscribe to a couple of blogs/site feeds

Lecture 2: Blogs, Characteristics and Writing for Blogs

Questions

- What is a blog? How does it differ from a web site?
- What are front-end and back-end (other features) of a blog?
- What makes a blog a good blog? What would you blog about?

What is a blog?

- Blogs or Web logs are online journals mostly updated by individuals or a group of individuals on a variety of topics ranging from politics to celebrity gossips, hobbies to diets.
- Frequently updated web sites that are
  - immediate
  - interactive
  - freewheeling

Characteristics of blogs

- Frequently updated web site with entries displayed in reverse chronological order
- Is composed of posts expressing thoughts, opinions, and comments
- Is interactive and built around communities
- Contains links, images, videos, comments, and social media

History

- Started around the 1990's
- Became popular after 2001
- Sites like blogger.com, wordpress.com allow users to create and maintain blogs in web 2.0 environments

Characteristics of good blogs

- Engaging, immediate and interactive
- Conversational and inclusive
- Good reporting and analyses

(Authority)

Becoming a blogger

- Find a topic of your blog (name & description)
- Be motivated and passionate about the topic
- Choose a hosting site
  - WordPress.com
  - Blogger.com

Writing for blogs

- Direct and conversational tone
- Good organization with readers in mind
- Scan-able: specific headlines
- Write for rapid consumption
- Be the authority with personality

Writing for blogs (Cont'd)

- Link, summarize, and analyze
- Credit other sources and invite the audience
- A good (positive) attitude
- Do original reporting
- Be ethical
- Do not violate copyright

Exercise

Work with your classmate:

1. Think of a media convergence topic that you would like to blog about
2. Think of a name and description for your blog
3. Create a blog post, blogroll and page at WordPress.com.

Grading Rubric for the Convergence Research Blog Assignment

Media convergence research reports and arguments (10 points)

- Chooses a topic immediately relevant to the class that addresses important media convergence issues;
- Explicates, discusses, and analyzes issues relevant to convergence such as social networking, crowdsourcing, the "gig" economy, online journalism, copyright, security, privacy, freedom of speech, etc.
- Discusses exemplary, representative, or unique issues and cases that explain/discuss media convergence;
- Relates these issues to the book, class readings, and other sources (5-6 sources) and summarizes them cogently;
- Demonstrates that you developed new understanding and answers to the questions you posed;
- Reads well with clear points and arguments and is around 750-1000 words long;

Blog Space (5 points)

- Is well structured with a thoughtful layout, appearance, and widgets that fit the topic of your research;
- Links to prominent blogs or relevant web sites and uses meta information—tags and categories;
- Links to the academic sources, and has a Works Cited page;
- Incorporates relevant images and videos without violating copyright law;

Presentation (5 points)

- Presents clearly and accurately the research findings and answers;
- Is well organized and presented in an engaging and professional way (You must not read from the screen); and
- Engages the class and involves the both partners equally.

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Biography

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Undrah Baasanjav is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Mass Communications at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, where she teaches the Writing and Design for Digital Media course. She has previously taught digital media courses at Temple and Michigan Technological Universities. Dr. Baasanjav researches convergent media, and media policy in developing countries, and her work has appeared in the journals *Information, Communication and Society, International Journal of Digital Television, Journal of Information Technology and Politics, Journal of Online Learning and Teaching, New Media and Society, Online Journal of Space Communication* and *Telecommunications Policy.*