

# Nailing convergence journalism

## Case study Massey University's multi platform reporting course

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### *Abstract*

Convergence journalism has been the focus of industry conferences and discussions for almost ten years, but there is growing concern that educators are not adequately preparing students for this new media industry. There are criticisms overseas that journalism schools confuse “online” and “convergence” journalism, ignore performance skills, and overlook the newsroom culture shift. Beyond this, the concern is that journalism courses are leaving a void in preparing students for the new multi-media culture. In reality, the new converged media is still in its infancy in New Zealand, mainly confined to traditional media with a website platform. It is predicted that newsrooms will shift rapidly to new platforms, and will require trained convergence journalists. This year Massey University designed and ran a 37-hour convergence journalism module for the journalism diploma students. The module included the skills identified by overseas converged media editors as crucial for new journalists, acknowledged the new paradigm of news gathering, but also distinguished the immediate needs of the New Zealand media industry. This presentation outlines the module's structure and student response.

## Convergence Journalism:

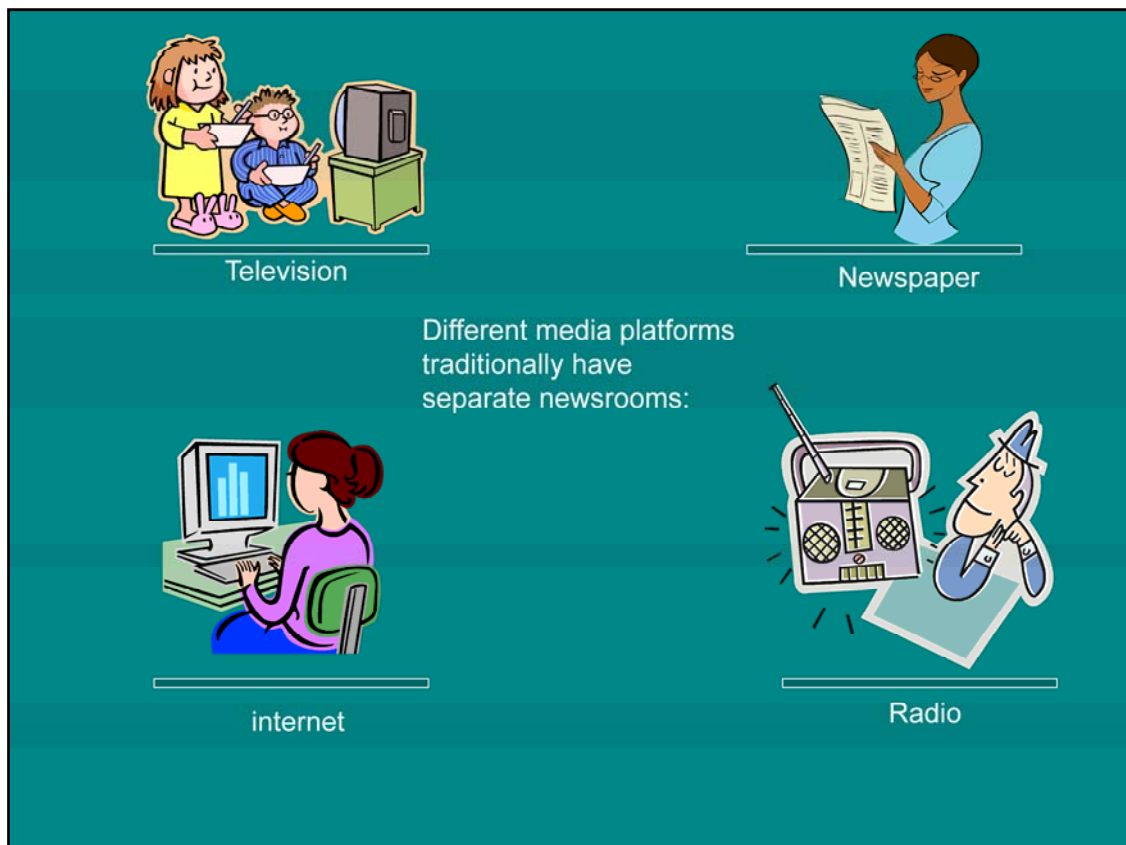
“ .... reporters producing for more than one platform ..... packaging of content for different platforms.

(Aviles & Carvajal, 2008)

There is a wide variety of definitions for convergence journalism; in fact there are sizeable academic papers devoted simply to finding a definition. I've adopted this one (above) with the realisation that most newsrooms, especially in New Zealand, are CONVERGEING newsrooms and a fair way off from being converged.

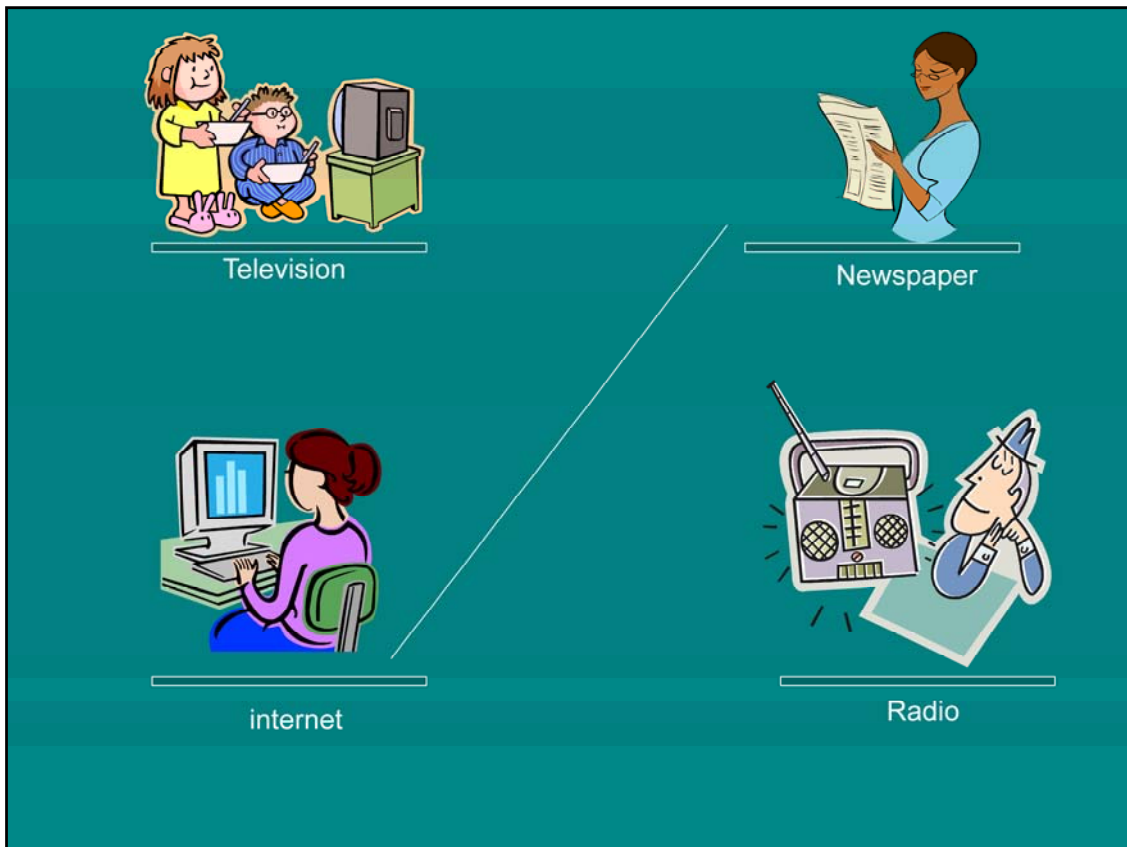
Convergence journalism stems from the trend towards converged media. It has introduced a long list of new terminology. In some ways we are talking about journalists able to function in a multi-media environment, but in addition to this it is overlaid with a complex deadline structure.

First we'll look at the definition of convergence media that I have adopted. It starts with all the different platforms .....



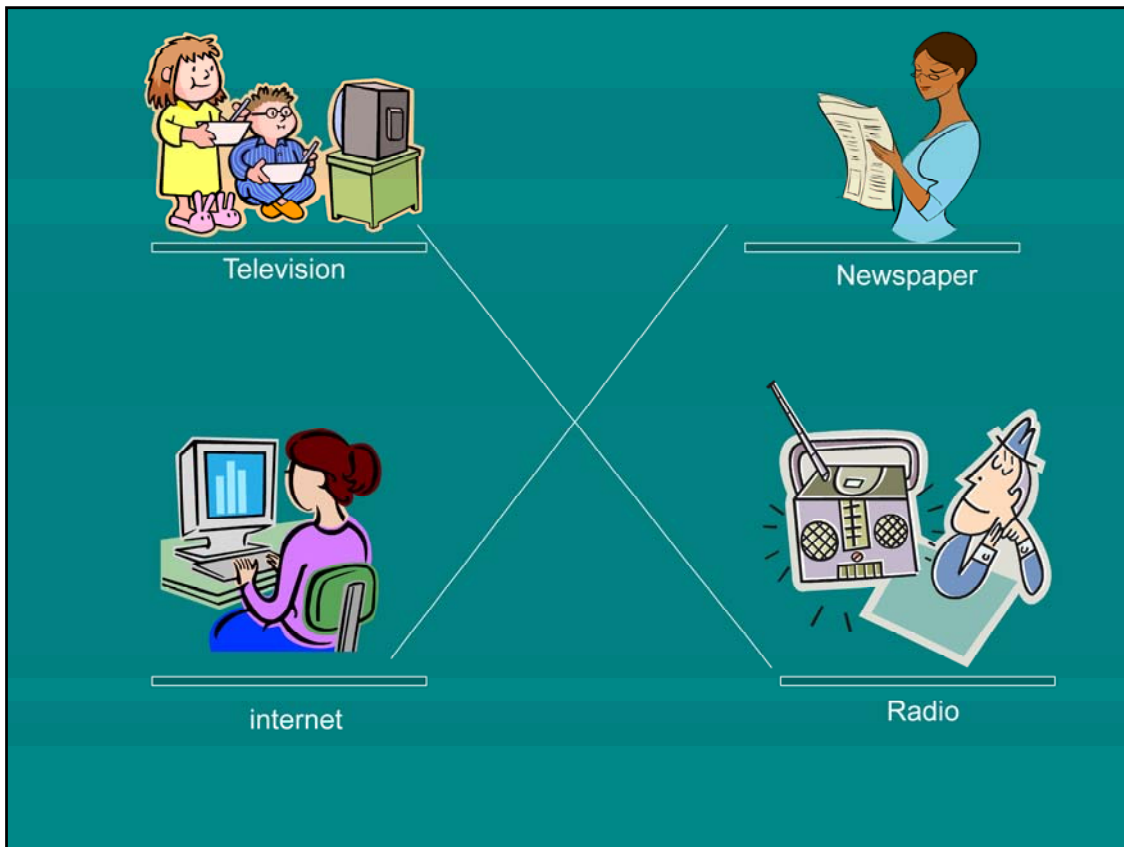
These used to be called simply the different parts of the mass media scene. But now they are called platforms. This terminology makes sense in light of the fact that it is the technology segment and the owners of the companies that are driving this. The journalists could be considered simply bit players.

But from the journalists' point of view, each platform has a different audience -- people who access their news in different ways and with different expectations. Distributing a news item through these different platforms is the unique skill of the convergent journalist.



Let's start with what were traditionally called "different media"

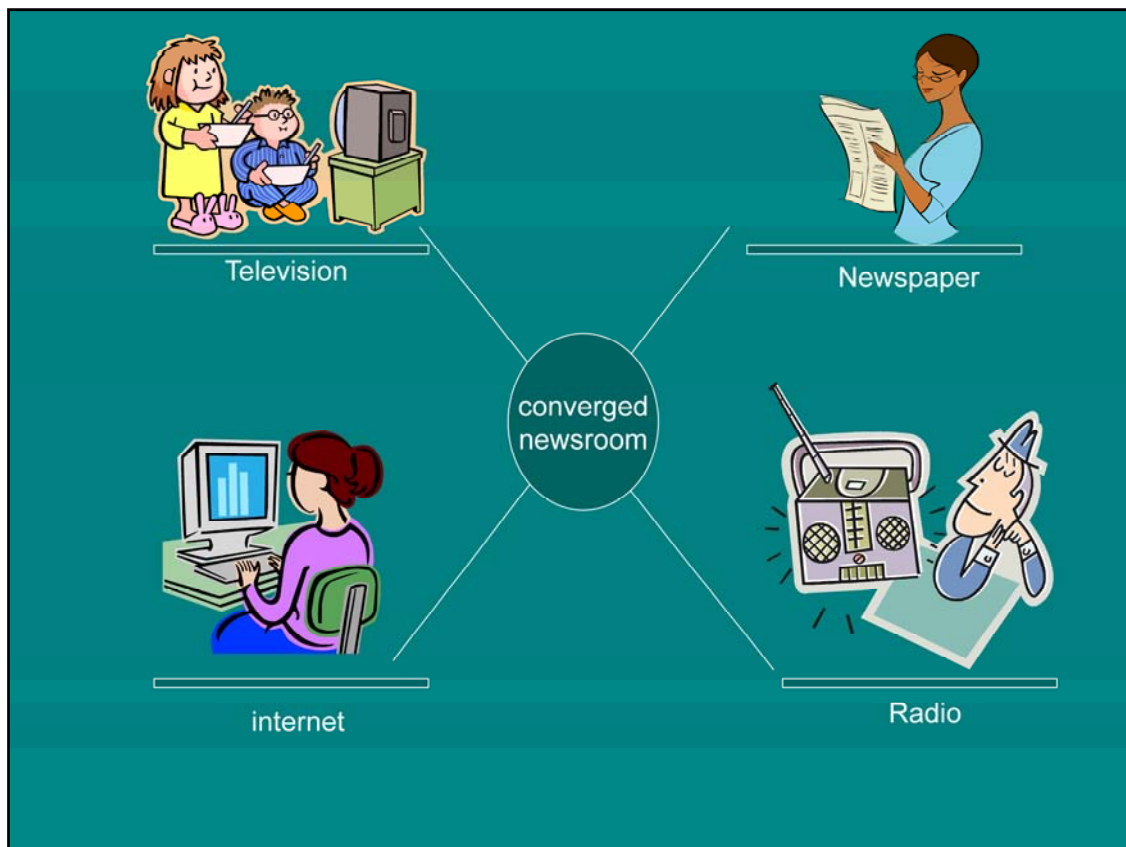
A situation arises where two of them combine, in either a merger or an expansion. We are familiar with a newspaper also putting out internet news. This is the first step towards convergence journalism.



The next step is when the one newsroom provides stories for two or more different media.

In New Zealand this isn't particularly new. We had a joined television and radio newsroom back in the 1960s. That was NZBC when the same journalist produced a radio item and later in the day a television item. That was before the separation of the newsrooms into individual corporations in 1975.

But the true convergence newsroom is more than that.



The next step is when all of these platforms are under one ownership. More importantly to journalists, however, is that in its truest form, a single newsroom is providing news items to these diverse platforms.

Visualise the chief reporter who needs to fill tomorrow's newspaper, tonight's television news, the minute-by-minute internet, plus the tight timeframes for constant radio news. Who is assigned to cover a big fire of the townhall. A tv reporter would go to such a visual story, but a newspaper reporter would be able to provide analysis the next day. Does the chief reporter send two reporters? That is poor resource allocation, however if you have inherited a large newspaper staff, how will they get audio cuts, find the best video (not just a front page shot).

The problem is clear. Hence overseas chief reporters are now telling their reporters to "get converged."

## 300 editors want from converged journalists:

- **Good writing**
- **Multimedia production (provide stories for several different platforms)**
- **Critical thinking**
- **New technology**
- **Computer-assisted reporting**
- **Visual production**
- **Time management**
- **On-camera exposure (but not sounding like a newsreader)**

(Huang et al, 2006)

A survey of 300 editors who are already running converged newsrooms came up with the list of skills they wanted in the new journalist. (list above)

However there was also concern that journalism schools were not providing these skills. A monitor of some schools showed the curriculum they were marketing indicated confusion between “online” and “convergence” journalism

There is also the danger that some schools are teaching the same old curriculum and learning outcomes, but calling it “convergence” because the student articles are published on a website.



## European experience:

- Similar list of required skills
- Experienced journalists slow to upskill
- Print journalists reluctant to be on-camera or on-microphone.

(Aviles & Carvajal, 2008)

A similar study of European converged newsrooms came up with a similar list. However this study also identified that experienced journalists were very slow to upskill. Another interesting finding of this study was that broadcast journalists could eventually adapt to producing for the print platform -- but print journalists were reluctant to be take up performance skills, such as reporting in front of a camera or into a microphone

With this in mind it seems that there needs to be a different newsroom culture (paradigm shift) which I describe as “the reporter owning the story”. The story is so much theirs that they can tell it visually, audibly, print, or online.

This isn't easy. Those in TV know it takes time to be able to think in pictures, to quickly determine how to SHOW the story. Equally so for radio journalists who need to focus on the good snappy audio cut, or the sound effects that may make the story.



## Learning outcomes for the convergence:

- Use a variety of technology
- Be comfortable with performance side of reporting
- Know audience expectations for the different platforms
- Are aware of the global issues surrounding the converged media.

The new journalist is in a new environment of news gathering. The news judgement is the same, but there are new -- and more -- formatting requirements.

So in designing the convergence module at Massey we agreed that the learning outcome would be the four items listed above.

Our theoretical context is that they are still student journalists, still focused on learning reporting skills. This prohibited our diversifying into teaching them to be webmasters, camera or sound operators, or film editors.

## Overall outline

1. Radio skills
2. Television skills
3. Web-writing
4. Time pressure
5. Controlled media conference exercise
6. Real story exercise
7. Academic analysis of the global issues

The convergence module was a 37-hour segment condensed into a three week time span. It was scheduled half way through the one-year journalism diploma course. The students already were proficient in basic print media reporting skills, and had each published at least 12 newspaper stories.

The list above shows the outline and order of events for the module.

## Radio Skills

- Scripting –
  - bulletin items, voice reports
- Technical –
  - interview on digital (marantz)
  - Download and edit cuts on PC (soundforge)
  - Self drive in sound booth
- Produce
  - package
  - audio cuts
  - voice report
- Voice performance
- Think audio



The learning outcomes for the radio skills were that the student would be able to produce a good quality edited audio interview that could be used on an internet news site.

The radio segment of the course did widen its scope and the students were also able to produce quality radio “packages” that would be up to standard for commercial and public radio stations.

These “packages” are not likely to be used on internet sites, but it was a learning outcome that helped the students consolidate the new skills of angle development, flow, editing, voice performance, and scripting.

## Television skills

- Performance skills
  - Piece to camera
- Interviewing
  - For visual grabs
- Technical –
  - Camera (handicam)
  - Tripod and external microphone
  - Framing, background, clean sound
  - Downloading and editing (iMovie HD)
- Think visual



The television skills were truncated to those most likely to be used in the short term by a converged newsroom in New Zealand, most likely a newspaper producing a multi-media style of internet news.

These skills are listed above. There was individual coaching available for each student to perfect their own in-front of camera style and also their voice performance. There was additional coaching available for those who wanted more personal development.

## Writing for Web

- Strong tag lines
- Punchy writing
- Global English
- Tight deadline
- Rapid updates
- *Web Word Wizardry*  
(McAlpine)
- *OnLine Journalism*  
(Tapas Ray)



A major emphasis on the module was good writing for the web, which is a skill many of these students will face in the early parts of their career.

The learning outcomes are listed above.

The text book used was McAlpine's *Web Word Wizardry*. Next year we will probably change to Ray's *OnLine Journalism*.

## Media conference

## Practical Exercise

### Required:

- Feeding all platforms
- Research
- Angle determination
- Team work
- Deadline pressure
- Technical risks



After learning the various skills required for providing a convergence story, they were given an assignment to cover a mock media conference and produce news stories for all platforms.

This was done in groups of three. This gave them peer group support and helped meet the deadline.

The exercise used a complex set of facts with two actors as interview subjects. The students were required to determine which angle to use for which platform, to gather the data in video and audio form .

The end outcome was each team produced a story based on a video *cut*, a second story based on an audio *cut*, and a web story.




## Real news

Similar to exercise, but:

- Done solo
- Real news stories
- Upload video and audio via YouTube
- Position video, audio, web story on Facebook

*Massey Convergence*  
page



The second large exercise required each individual to turn in a multi-platform news story. This was done under the pressure of a tight deadline, as well as requiring them to find a real news item to develop.

We used “YouTube” to upload the video cuts and the audio cuts.

Then the students transferred these to a Facebook page we set up especially for the assignment, called “Massey Convergence” page.

I used these social networking websites because of the comfort level it afforded the students. Most of them were familiar with these sites, and therefore somewhat competent in the internet skills required. This reduced the challenge of having to learn a new software programme. Their focus could be on the specific skills required for convergence journalism.



# Theoretic assignments



The students also had to complete two academic assignments on current issues surrounding convergence journalism. One was a study of a recent judicial decision on overlapping platforms.

The other was an assessed discourse on conflict surrounding convergent journalists, based on the my diagram of conflicting agendas (above).

An interesting point is that the feedback on the various segments of the module the students found the second assignment one of the most valuable parts of the course.

They also favoured having the academic discussions at the end of the module, well after the practical segment. They said it made the theoretical part of it more relevant for them.

## Evaluation of module:

- Externally web-based survey
- Anonymous self-administered
- Six months after the module
- Participants now employed in the media

After they completed the journalism diploma course, I conducted an external web-based anonymous survey of the 20 participants. Most were permanently employed journalists at this time, and all had spent at least two weeks in a newsroom.

## 83% said the module changed their view of journalism

- *“I was sceptical, but ended up really enjoying convergence.”*
- *“I realise I don’t need to stay a print journalist my whole career.”*
- *“Before doing the module, I just assumed all web stories were print stories, which had been slapped on the net (obviously they aren’t).”*

83% said the module changed their view of journalism.

The module was held half way through the academic year, after they’ had learned basic journalism skills, and were comfortable in producing stories and photographs for local newspapers.

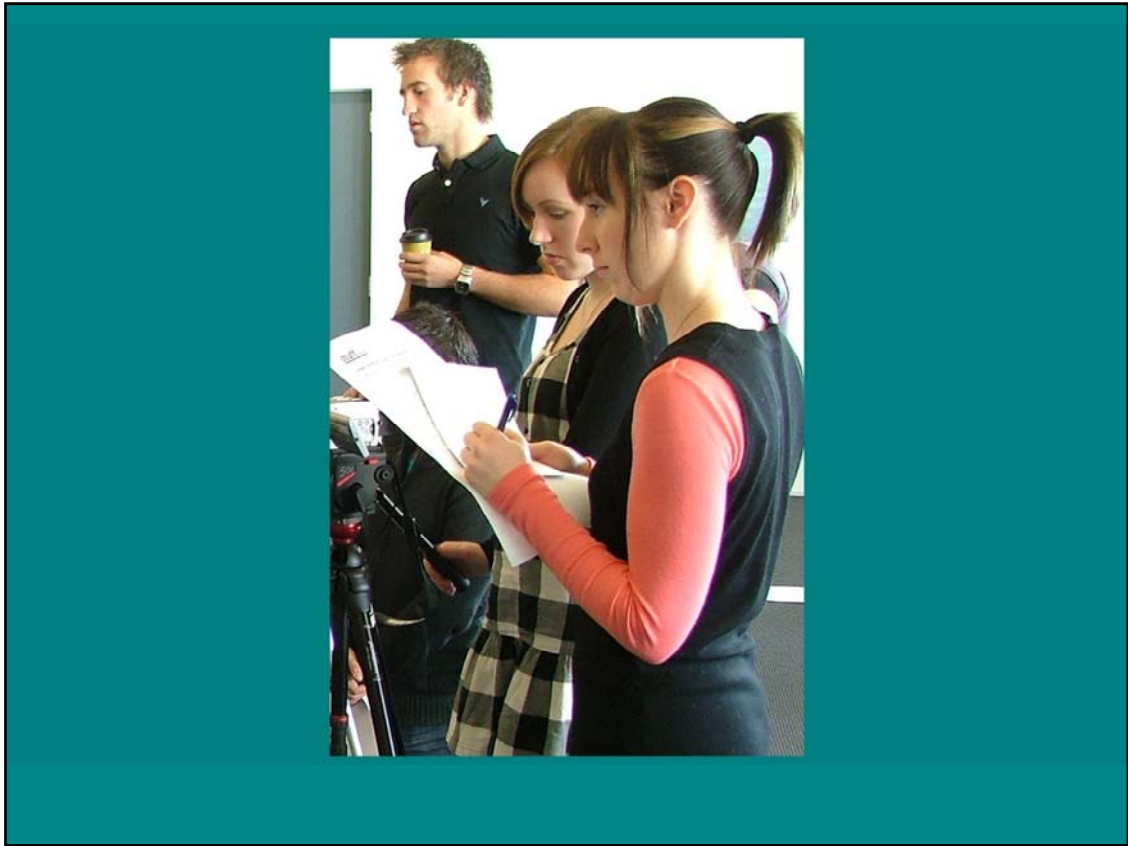
They said the convergence module showed a broader view of journalism.; and although they came to Massey for print journalism, they liked the idea that they needn’t stay there.

## 90% said the module gave them confidence in the future

- *“Job cuts at papers and the expansion of the online field means these skills will be invaluable for future journalists.”*
- *“It adds another dimension to your employability.”*
- *“An exciting new challenge for young journalists.”*
- *“I feel my experience at Massey put me ahead of the game and confident the skills I learned will equip me well for the modern workforce.”*

One of the main things they identified as valuable from this module is that it empowered them going into the newsroom. They felt it future-proofed their skills.

In an open-ended question 90% of students referred to the confidence it gave them to know skills that are to be used in the future.



In fact, two students had an opportunity to use their new skills within days of the completion of our module. One worked part time at the internet news site, Stuff, and was able to put it to practice on his first day. When the truck protest hit Wellington the editor wanted a reporter to cover it with a video camera. While the experienced newspaper reporters stayed silent, the student's arm shot up to volunteer. He was strapped into a helicopter, told to lean out the open door, and shot the video story. He filed it on the web while the protest was still progressing. He admitted later that hanging out a helicopter is a dream assignment for a young man.

Performance skills were emphasised in the course. This was in response to the European research that showed print journalists found these skills difficult to adopt. This decision proved a correct step, as the students rated piece to camera and radio voice skills the most challenging and the most valuable.

However an incremental learning point is that at the students weren't afraid to fail. In addition, some were able to expose their weaknesses as they developed competency in the areas they found most challenging. This may not be the same attitude if they were mid-career journalists and had a reputation to protect.

## Respondents who have worked in multiplatform newsrooms gave the skills they found most useful:

- Confident to produce for multi platforms
- Able to tell a story in different forms
- Think quickly, work at pace
- Write creatively AND concise

The students were surveyed AFTER they had completed their journalism diploma and were out in the work force. It is interesting that 9 students have already had some experience in converging newsrooms, and could list which skills they had learned that best equipped them for the environment. These are listed above.

All respondents were asked to use the traditional Likert scale to rate each elements of the module. The results indicated the most valuable segments were the performance skills (piece to camera and radio voice performance) plus the academic look at converged journalists.

This last one was an unexpected result, since students often rate the practical skills more highly than academic work. This result could their realisation that they are entering an environment new to everyone in the industry, and this assignment forewarned them of any possible acrimony towards them as practitioners.



## One respondent said:

- *“At present, many editors and reporters are extremely wary and apprehensive about using new technology and combining a selection of mediums to tell a story. Education on convergence, not just for new journalists, but for editors and sub-editors is important if we want to move with the times.”*

I thought you'd be interested on the comments from one of the former students who is now working in a converged newsroom



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At the beginning of the module most of the students had little understanding of convergence journalism, some never heard the word let alone the concept. At the completion of the module they said they felt they had nailed the skills.

They knew they hadn't PERFECTED this side of journalism, but the survey indicates they feel they have a good foundation to build on, and that they have the skills to take them into the future of journalism whether they stay in New Zealand or go overseas.

In summary, we in New Zealand can learn from the experiences overseas so our students are equipped for the future, and more importantly enthused for the future.