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Abstract

Media convergence and newsroom integration have become industry buzzwords as the ideas spread through newsrooms around the world. In November 2007 Fairfax Media in Australia introduced the newsroom of the future model, as its flagship newspapers moved into a purpose-built newsroom in Sydney. News Ltd, the country’s next biggest media group, is also embracing multi-media forms of reporting. What are the implications of this development for journalism? This paper examines changes in the practice of journalism in Australia and around the world. It attempts to answer the question: How does the practice of journalism need to change to prepare not for the future, but for the likely present.

Early in November 2007 The Sydney Morning Herald, the Australian Financial Review and the Sun-Herald moved into a new building dubbed the ‘newsroom of the future’ at One Darling Island Road in Sydney’s Darling Harbour precinct. Phil McLean, at the time Fairfax Media’s group executive editor and the man in charge of the move, said three quarters of the entire process involved getting people to ‘think differently’ – that is, to modify their mindset so they could work with multi-media.

The new newsroom symbolised the culmination of a series of major changes at Fairfax. In August 2006 the traditional newspaper company, John Fairfax Ltd, changed its name to Fairfax Media to reflect its multi-platform future. In March 2007 Fairfax launched Australia’s first online-only daily publication in Queensland, brisbanetimes.com.au. In May 2007 Fairfax completed its merger with Rural Press to become the biggest media company in Australasia, with annual revenues of about $2.5 billion and market capitalisation of about $7 billion. Two months later Fairfax got even bigger when it acquired at least one radio station in all Australian capital cities plus television studios when it bought Southern Cross Broadcasting. Fairfax is expected to bid for one of the two digital television licences made available by the changes to media ownership laws promulgated in May 2007.

The aim in moving Fairfax from a print to a multi-platform company was to reach as large an audience as possible. ‘We have a total readership in print of over 4 million per day and online of over 5 million per month’, CEO David Kirk said at the time of the Rural Press merger. ‘Our brand of quality, independent, balanced journalism will serve and support more communities than ever’ (Kirk 2007). A few months earlier chairman Ron Walker had written in the company’s annual report: ‘Fairfax is evolving into a truly digital media company’ (2006: 2). Within five years Fairfax would be a significantly bigger Internet company that distributed its content ‘over more media’, Kirk wrote in the same report (2006: 5).

Kirk developed a three-pronged strategy. The first part of the strategy involved the need to ‘defend and grow our newspaper publishing businesses’ – that is, to consolidate and develop the existing newspapers, whose circulations were holding steady during the week and improving on Saturdays. The second part involved plans to ‘accelerate the revenue and earnings of our digital business’. The third part was ‘to build a digital media company for the twenty-first century’ (Fairfax annual report 2006: 3). In June 2007 Kirk appointed Tim Mannes project leader for the Fairfax Media-Rural Press integration. ‘The purpose of the integration work is to bring the two companies together and build what is truly Australasia’s leading media company’, Mannes wrote in a memo to all staff on 7 June...
2007. ‘It’s vital throughout this process that we maintain continuity and momentum and protect the interests and needs of our customers’ (2007: 1).

The business model appears attractive. Kirk said Fairfax’s increased scale and diversity would mean it relied less on classified lineage advertising in major metropolitan newspapers, so it could ‘rapidly develop the best online response to changing media advertising patterns’. In the two years to 2006, online’s contribution to Fairfax’s profits had grown from 1 per cent to 14 per cent with ‘much more to come’. Online’s share of the national advertising pie had grown from 2 per cent in 2002 to 10 per cent in 2006 (Beverley 2007: 6) and had jumped to 14 per cent in 2007. Analysts said they were happy with Fairfax’s move ‘from a newspaper company to a media company’ and banks such as Credit Suisse upgraded their profits forecast (AFR 19 September 2007: 37).

Planning for the move to One Darling Island Road in Sydney’s Darling Harbour started early in 2006. Fairfax CEO David Kirk took personal responsibility. He and chairman Ron Walker visited integrated sites around the world, along with a group of editorial bosses. The favoured site was The Daily Telegraph in London, which embraced convergence from June 2006. CEO Murdoch McLennan hired a consultant from Ifra, Dr Dietmar Schantin, director of the Newsplex, to facilitate the move from mono-media to multi-media at The Telegraph. Schantin said change was less about new technologies and more about altering the established mindset. The focus must be on the audience: ‘The whole idea of audience orientation seems to be quite new for some newspapers. In the past it was more “we know what is good for our readers and so we distribute the content”.’ Newspapers were a service industry whose service was information and news, he said. Newspapers had to learn to ‘serve’ its audience with the things the audience wanted to know, on any appropriate platform. ‘We start from the audience. What they want is a very important point. That does not mean that a newspaper should just do what the audience wants. The newspaper [also] needs to stick to its core values’ (Luft 2006, Coleman 2007: 5).

Tom Curley, CEO of the world’s biggest newsgathering organisation, Associated Press, gave an important speech to the annual Knight-Bagehot dinner in New York in November 2007. The news industry had come to a fork in the road and needed to take bold steps to secure the audiences and funding to support journalism’s essential role for both the economy and democracy, he said. Otherwise the media industry would find itself ‘on an ugly path to obscurity’. He similarly emphasised the need to serve the audience: ‘Our focus must be on becoming the very best at filling people’s 24-hour news needs. That’s a huge shift from the we-know-best, gatekeeper thinking. Sourcing, fact gathering, researching, storytelling, editing [and] packaging aren’t going away’ (Curley 2007).

Kirk appointed a ‘newsroom of the future’ committee from editorial (reporters and photographers), IT and HR. The committee initiated a study tour by editorial executives of leading integrated and converged newsrooms in the UK and the US in April 2007. This became known as the ‘Tier 1’ course and involved the editor and deputy editor of The Age, and the news editor of The Sydney Morning Herald. The Herald’s editor went to the annual conference of the World Association of Newspapers in Cape Town, South Africa in June 2007 because that event featured convergence as one of its main themes (PANPA Bulletin June 2007: 6). The committee designed a two-day awareness course for senior editorial managers, known as ‘Tier 2’, that was run in Sydney in July 2007. The ‘Tier 3’ program for all editorial staff started in August 2007 and this ‘multi-media awareness program’ continued until the end of the year. A ‘Tier 4’ course for about 10 per cent of editorial staff (about 40 journalists), where they learned a range of multi-media skills, was scheduled to start after the Beijing Olympics in 2008. The author facilitated most of the Tier 2 and 3 courses.

The Tier 3 and 4 courses have profound implications for journalism education in Australia because they represent the start of major changes to how journalists work in Australia. The process reflects evolution in newsroom practices around the world. In November 2006 Ifra, the international media research company, asked newspaper executives worldwide about their priorities for 2007. The
survey attracted 240 responses from 43 countries and results appeared in January 2007. Integration, editorial convergence and cross-media strategies attracted the most attention. Four in five executives rated it one of their top priorities, and half made it their main priority in terms of allocating ‘significant’ funds (Ifra 2007: 34). Ifra repeated the survey in November 2007 and published the results in January 2008. Expanding web strategies was first on the list for 2008, just ahead of editorial convergence strategies, which topped the list in 2007. Improving video and audio content jumped 14 places, and mobile phone strategies leapt 9 places between 2007 and 2008 to be near the top of the list (Ifra 2008: 8).

Some definitions

It might be useful here to define some terms to ensure everyone is singing off the same hymnbook. Integration has come to be accepted as the term that describes the joining of online and print newsgathering operations in the same newsroom. A major example is the merging of the online and print newsrooms at The New York Times, announced in August 2005, that took place when the organisation moved to a new building in 2007. Convergence in editorial terms occurs when one newsroom provides content for all platforms. It does not mean that all reporters work in all media, but it does require all journalists to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each medium.

Typically a converged newsroom has a symbol of convergence such as a central ‘super’ desk where editors from all media sit. The desk enhances communication across platforms. The number of multi-media reporters varies within each organisation, depending on priorities. True convergence journalism focuses on the story, which means editors choose the most appropriate medium for telling the story. That is, the news event dictates the level and form of coverage. So one reporter might cover a routine mayor’s press conference. But a team of reporters would be sent to a major fire in a block of city apartments. Some of the best examples of convergence include Nordjyske Medier in Denmark, the Lawrence World Journal company in Kansas, and the Turun Sanomat group in Finland (Quinn 2005: 21–3).

Relevance to the journalism curriculum

What does Fairfax’s move mean for the journalism curriculum in Australia? It means educators have to become more relevant. Industrial-age curricula devised in the 1970s are no longer useful. The key is preparing students for a multi-media future, which means adapting the mindset of teachers so they help their students embrace change. Mike Van Niekerk, CEO of Fairfax’s online editorial staff, said newsroom integration depended on changing a newsroom’s culture and mindsets. McLean agreed: Much of Fairfax’s training, instead of teaching journalists specific tricks, aimed ‘to recalibrate the way people think about journalism’. Training all journalists in multi-media did not mean an end to specialisation. ‘We don’t expect everybody to practise it [multi-media], but everybody must think’ in those terms, they said (Editors Weblog 2007).

Part of the newsroom of the future project involved introducing journalists to a portable data assistant (PDA) called a JasJam. Contrary to what The Australian’s Media section reported on 23 August 2007, not all Fairfax journalists would be equipped with JasJams. Reporters and photographers involved with breaking news would use the devices, McLean said. ‘That’s somewhere between a dozen and 20 reporters at The Sydney Morning Herald and another 15–20 at The Age.’ A pool of about 70–80 JasJams would be made available for specific assignments. Reporters at BrisbaneTimes.com.au, the online-only venture launched in March 2007, were equipped with the JasJam from the outset (Editors Weblog 2007).

A similar process took place when the online-only WAToday.com.au launched in Perth in June 2008. The issue was not the technology, McLean and Van Niekerk emphasised, but preparing journalists for new ways of providing information to audiences. ‘It’s the JasJam today, but it could
well be a different piece of equipment tomorrow’, Van Niekerk said. McLean said it was likely be ‘superseded within the next 12 months’ (Editors Weblog 2007).

Australia’s next biggest media company, News Ltd, has also embraced the multi-media future, though at the time of writing the embrace had been less well publicised. In his Andrew Olle memorial lecture on 19 October 2007, News Ltd CEO and chairman John Hartigan said it had never been a better time to be a journalist. ‘If you really care about journalism you have to be passionate about re-inventing it in the digital age’, he said. ‘As journalists we’ve never had more inducements to open our minds, stretch our imaginations or reach more people. We can write, blog, broadcast audio and video, all from the one work-station.’

Hartigan said that for much of his 43-year career most journalists were generalists, ‘sweeping over any subject with a light dusting of curiosity and a nice turn of phrase’. But he warned that those days were numbered. Journalism needed more specialists, he argued – ‘more people who can provide compelling insights to what’s going on’ because quality was ‘taking on greater meaning, not less’. Hartigan said competition for talent was intensifying. ‘We will need to pay more and offer better opportunities to attract – and retain – the best people’ (Hartigan 2007). In other words, quality content was the key. In a world of information overload, audiences return to brands they can trust. The role of those brands was to synthesize information and make it easy to absorb. That deep skill requires highly skilled and educated journalists. The obvious place to find specialists is at universities and think tanks.

Journalism education around the world

Major changes to journalism education elsewhere around the world suggest that unless Australian educators make themselves more relevant, they risk becoming redundant. India provides an object lesson: Newspapers are booming in India, and most of the major media companies there are setting up their own journalism schools because they do not consider universities to be relevant. Raju Narisetti, managing editor of Mint, a business daily, said most Indian universities that offered journalism degrees were terrible. ‘The professors have not set foot in a newsroom for a decade’ (personal interview 2007). Narisetti spent 18 years with the Wall Street Journal, much of that time as an associate managing editor, before returning to India in 2006.

Pankaj Paul, managing editor of the Hindustan Times, agreed with Narisetti’s assessment. He said a media company’s role was to provide information to audiences ‘whenever they want it, wherever they are’. This meant a change of mindset by journalists and the people who trained them. Paul divided journalism into two distinct groups: those who gathered content and the people who delivered it. ‘The content could be text, video, images, audio, anything. It goes into a giant bucket, and the delivery person sifts through that content and chooses where to send it.’ Paul urged journalists and journalism educators to ‘let go of the platform and go for content’. The aim should be to find the most appropriate medium for storytelling. He suggested fresh graduates should teach themselves multi-media tools if their teachers would not, because that was the direction journalism was heading. ‘We are all now sliver-casters.’ Journalists needed to accept that they were the bridge between audiences and information. ‘It is no longer good enough to be a good writer. You have to also be a good photographer and a good video-grapher, and a half way decent editor. There will always be jobs for people who create and deliver content’ (personal interview 2007).

Reuters in London established its own Journalism Academy in 2005 because it considered university courses irrelevant. Rich Taylor, who set up the school, said most university journalism programs were ‘entirely too theoretical’, accusing them of focusing too much ‘on the history of media rather than actually skilling them [students] up to write, at speed, on current markets and world events’. He was scathing of universities and their inability to adapt: ‘For my part, I doubt university programs are going to change, significantly enough and fast enough, to meet industry needs. Hence, industry is helping itself.’ Taylor said Reuters believed it could do a better and less expensive education job than ‘pretty much any academic outfit’ because it had staff with recent
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experience, compared with academics who had not been in a newsroom for years. ‘We offer a real-world environment rather than a theoretical study’ (Taylor 2005). Tony Gillies, editor-in-chief of Australian Associated Press, said AAP was planning to establish a school of journalism, focusing on multi-media. The UK Press Association, based in London, did the same thing in 2006. Both organisations said their aim was to create a group of in-house staff capable of working as multi-media journalists (personal observation 23 July 2006).

These developments should be a warning to journalism educators.

Keith Woods is dean of the journalism faculty at the Poynter Institute in the United States. He said many American journalism schools did not teach multi-media because faculty did not understand new technologies, equipment was expensive, and ‘old habits die hard’. By the last statement he meant it was difficult to change educators’ mindsets (Jarvis et al 2007). Bryan Murley of Eastern Illinois University surveyed university newspaper advisers and found 58.7 per cent in 2006 and 53 per cent in 2007 believed campus media had not kept pace with advances in commercial media. ‘Journalism education is lagging behind industry in embracing the new media technologies that students will need to be competitive in the work place’, wrote Elizabeth Redden in Inside Higher Education (Redden 2007).

Massé and Popovich found ‘systemic resistance to curriculum reform’ in news writing courses. They suggested reformers among American journalism educators were likely to encounter resistance to more recent ideas such as convergence (2007: 155). Rob Curley, vice-president for new media at the Washington Post/Newsweek company until mid 2008, said any graduate who had not been offered multi-media courses while at university had the right ‘to punch the dean in the mouth’, such was the importance of multi-media to the student’s career (Curley 2004).

Professor Roy Greenslade of City University in London said almost all of his students had ‘grown up with the Net’. Today’s journalism students were multi-media aware and had more skills than their teachers. The issue was whether teachers encouraged students to develop those skills. ‘When I asked my class who was signed up for Facebook, virtually everybody raised their hand.’ Jeff Jarvis is a journalist and blogger who directs the new media program at the City University of New York’s graduate school of journalism. He said journalism students typically came from the demographic that newspapers were trying to reach, and they had good multi-media skills. ‘Most students come in open to what’s next’ (Editors Weblog 2007). How many Australian journalism academics have a Facebook account? How many write blogs? How many understand the power of social media? It would be interesting to survey Australian journalism educators’ personal adoption of multi-media. Anecdotal evidence suggests the numbers are low.

Many American universities have adapted their curricula to incorporate convergence and integration. In 2003 Professor Edgar Huang and a group of his graduate students at Indiana University conducted a national survey of American universities, daily newspapers and commercial television stations to ask how journalism schools should prepare students for convergence. The majority of the respondents (84 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that journalism students should learn how to write for multiple-media platforms, and 78 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that all journalism majors should learn multiple sets of skills such as writing, editing, television production, digital photography, newspaper design, and web publishing.

The Huang research showed three in five journalism schools in the United States had adapted their curricula or developed new courses to prepare for convergence, but concluded more convergence in the curriculum was ‘an urgent necessity’. Over time a wait-and-see strategy would disadvantage journalism schools. Huang et al suggested that schools needed to provide cross-media knowledge and experience to help students find cross-media jobs. Multi-dimensional news reporting over multiple platforms would be the way tomorrow’s news was presented, the researchers concluded. ‘Therefore, dealing with media convergence in college journalism education is an urgent necessity. The wait-and-see strategy will place a J-school in a disadvantaged position over the long run ....
Media convergence poses both challenge and opportunity to J-schools for them to reconsider their current curriculum design, sequence setting, faculty composition, teaching methods, and internship approaches (Huang 2003: 15).

Professor Peter Verwey directs the New Media Lab at the School of Journalism at Utrecht in the Netherlands. Changes in the curriculum over the past 10 years had been designed to help students develop a multi-media mindset. ‘We work along two lines. First the Internet is an important source, and we train journalists to do advanced searches, plus we focus on methodology and statistics related to database searches. Knowledge of maps and GIS [geographic information systems] is added to these searches. In our first and second years we have courses for all journalism students related to these issues.’ Secondly, Dr Verwey said his school treated the Internet as a new publishing medium. Most student work was published on the web. ‘It makes students aware of production in the digital environment. Our print, radio and TV departments use this system to publish their stories.’ For multi-platform publishing and convergence the school used blogs. ’Cross media publishing or multi-platform publishing is taught at two levels on the blog.’ In 2007 Dr Verwey had students working in multi-media teams of writer, photographer, and video reporter. They gathered content and produced a story for various platforms: TV, radio, the blog and print (the website). ‘We think we come close to teaching convergence in practice. After the course our third and fourth year students are aware of the fact that journalism is teamwork, and that content (news) is leading, not the medium. The question we constantly ask the students is: which content to use for which platforms and for which audience?’ (Verwey 2007)

In 2008 only three of Australia’s 24 journalism programs offered a course or unit with the word ‘multi-media’ in the title, though some operated integrated newsrooms for their students. The University of Canberra was a pioneer when it moved to a converged model in 2005. Change was happening elsewhere, but slowly. UTS program director Wendy Bacon said she and her colleagues were reviewing their curriculum ‘to develop storytelling skills across all media’ by 2009. In 2007 the University of Wollongong journalism program required students to take two compulsory convergent journalism subjects (Pearson 2007: 6–7).

Updating the curriculum in Australia

Given the above context, and the move to multi-media at Fairfax and News Ltd, how does the Australian journalism curriculum need to change to adapt to a multi-media way of working? It needs to accept the split in functions between content gatherers and assemblers that Pankaj Paul identified. It needs to focus on the audience, based on the changes that Schantin instigated at The Telegraph: That is, journalists and journalism students must know for whom they are reporting. And students must appreciate the need for providing quality content for that audience, connecting with Hartigan’s call for better quality journalists to provide higher-quality content.

The concept of quality remains vague, but it must sit in the context of what is relevant for the desired audience. One could argue that the content a media company provides for the A-B demographic is different from the content intended for a western-Sydney blue collar demographic like the Daily Telegraph. Regardless of the media platform, the audience must perceive the content as being relevant: That is, quality is what the audience both wants and needs. Journalism needs to provide the spinach along with the sweets: Giving audiences information with which they can make decisions as citizens, as well an entertainment.

Because audiences consist of busy people, the content must be made available in ways that people find easy to absorb and understand. Clarity and convenience become key issues, within the context of quality. Narisetti had this idea when he launched Mint in India: ‘We wanted to make the paper as easy as possible to navigate and read. The main premise of Mint is clarity. That is what I promise. Whatever people read in the paper they will understand; they will know what it is about. That is what differentiates us in the market’ (Narisetti 2007). The new newspaper has been a huge success.
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The University of Queensland’s journalism curriculum represents the most complete understanding of multi-media in Australia. Professor Michael Bromley, department chair, said the curriculum started with storytelling and encouraged students to use whatever format or platform they preferred. He said the curriculum was ‘cross-media, multi-media or maybe even post-media’. Most students were, as Rupert Murdoch called them, ‘digital natives’ so their natural habitat was Facebook, Bebo, MySpace or YouTube. ‘What is interesting about these social networking sites is that they cross cultural boundaries. We see that as a real positive when it comes to learning about journalism and its purposes.’ Bromley said journalism at the University of Queensland emphasised the capabilities that applied to all journalists – investigating, reporting and editing. ‘We no longer refer to the industry silos [newspapers, radio and television] but ask students to apply their capabilities to text, sound and vision, and mixtures of these. We get students to think about audiences and their information needs, not media companies and their ingrained business models. It is only when we get to the end of the third year that we are forced to return to legacy media, because that is where the industry is in Australia. It is not where the students are. Nor do I think we have seen anything yet. For example, the capacity of mobile telephony has hardly been explored’ (Bromley 2007).

Educators must ensure students have a complete knowledge of law, ethics, and know ‘how to use and interact with their sources’. And students must also learn how to select their sources among bloggers. ‘There’s a lot more fact-guessing, fact-checking and collating than there was before, due to the unlimited number of sources.’ Educators must uphold standards: ‘We must show that journalism is still useful at a time when everybody can publish their “news” [online].’ Greenslade admitted his journalism department was ‘floundering’ as it worked towards implementing multimedia skills for students, but recognised it was important (Editors Weblog 2007).

Hartigan touched on the importance of fact checking in his Andrew Olle speech. But he emphasised the need to walk the streets and meet people: ‘As someone in a position to hire the next generation, what I want to see is the passionate curiosity and the instincts needed for our craft. They might love their mobile [phone], email and googling the world. But what they need is to get out of the office and build bloody good contacts. The best stories are still only available this way’ (Hartigan 2007).

Jarvis maintained that mobility and access to the Internet were vital. Every student at his school had a Macintosh laptop to foster multi-media capacity and mobility ‘so they can work from anywhere’. The Macintosh was the most appropriate tool for multi-media. All students were required to take the Fundamentals of Interactive Journalism course in their first semester. ‘This course has two main goals: firstly, they learn the basics of multi-media and how to produce all the forms out there, including audio, video, wikis, blogs, new methods of storytelling, and more. Every student must feel comfortable in every medium, although that doesn’t mean they’ll become experts.’ Secondly, students must learn how the changes in the digital realm have influenced the journalism industry, to learn about ‘changes and opportunities’ for journalism (Editors Weblog 2007).

Technology has got cheaper and simpler to use. As digital natives, many students have grown up with computers and mobile phones with cameras. It is more likely that educators will need to embrace technology, rather than their students. It is imperative that educators understand the potential of digital media, even if they cannot use it very efficiently. Educators need to partner with junior colleagues or students who have technology skills. This implies a need for humility. We can also expect the evolution of new forms of journalism brought about by changing technology and
changing consumer needs. Randy Bennett, the Newspaper Association of America’s vice president for industry development, said a major challenge for newspaper companies in the next decade would be the need to find, recruit and retain ‘technology-savvy personnel’. By savvy he meant people who were not wedded to one medium but were ‘comfortable working with technology’ (Bennett 2003). Journalism educators need that same cross-platform approach.

Training and education remain paramount, as does the notion of life-long learning – the idea that education does not end when one graduates. Despite limited natural resources and a small population, South Korea, Singapore and the Scandinavian nations have managed to become world leaders through investing in intellectual capital. These countries spend more of their GDP on education than most other nations. In Singapore’s case it is 20 per cent, the highest in the world. Sweden allocates 6.8 per cent of public spending, well above the OECD average of 5.1 per cent. Suk Hoick, president of South Korea’s Information Society Development Institute, said information and communication technologies contributed 16.1 per cent of his country’s GDP in 2006 (personal communication 2007).

Conclusion

Students need to understand that media are businesses that operate on a profit-loss basis. They also need to appreciate that much of their work in the next decade may be as a freelancer rather than in mainstream media, as markets tighten and jobs shrink. The redundancy program Fairfax Media announced in August 200, which involves the shedding of 550 jobs in Australia and New Zealand, shows we can expect fewer vacancies in mainstream media. This means students need to take courses in being an entrepreneur and running a small business. They also need to appreciate their various audiences. So they need to understand what it means when a company focuses on the A-B demographic. This means universities must offer courses in the sociology of demographics, and audience research.

Fairfax Media’s Phil McLean best summarised the new world of journalism: ‘Eventually reporters will file their story in a variety of media. Editors sitting at the central hub will instantly receive it in the queue, and then dispatch it to the medium they deem appropriate. A few minutes later, the story will be online, complete with still pictures. Later, the text will be updated with new information and a briefly edited video will complement coverage’ (Editors Weblog 2007).

It may take some years for McLean’s concept to materialise. This gives journalism educators time to update their journalism curriculum to prepare for a future that is rapidly becoming the present.

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