

Towards A Unified Approach to Media and Telecommunications Management Curriculum

**Richard A. Gershon, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University**

Background to the Discussion

Over the years, I've been concerned about the challenges and difficulties surrounding the teaching of media and telecommunications management curriculum. In 1999, the theme of the IRTS sponsored faculty/industry seminar was *Curriculum 2000*. At that time, the panel sessions and case study examined what we as university educators ought to be teaching in the years to come. During the case study competition, several proposals were put forth examining the kinds of basic building blocks (i.e. courses and experiential training) that should be part of a student's basic undergraduate learning experience. In 2000, the IRTS sponsored its next faculty/industry seminar entitled: *Telecommunications Management and Strategic Planning*. This faculty/industry seminar examined the business strategies being employed by today's media and telecommunication companies, involving the delivery of broadcast and cable television, television and film production, electronic journalism, and the Internet. Also featured during this conference was an all academic panel session entitled "Thinking Outside the Academic Box." The purpose for hosting the panel session was to consider some of the problems associated with being a relatively new and highly diverse field.

In 2003, the media management and economics division of the AEJMC sponsored a panel session examined media management curriculum. At that time, I gave a presentation that looked at the wide diversity of media management programs that currently exist at today's universities and

colleges. The following are just a few of the names of degree programs, majors (and areas of concentration) offered by some of today's leading media and telecommunications management programs. (see Table 1.)

Table 1.
Media and Telecommunications Degree Programs, Majors and Areas of Concentration

Degree, Major (or Area of Concentration)	University
Broadcast Journalism	USC Annenberg
Broadcasting	University of Tennessee
Communication (concentration media mgt.)	San Diego State University
Communication and Information Technology	Cornell University
Digital Media Studies	University of Denver
Electronic Media	University of Iowa
Electronic Media Marketing & Management	Southern Illinois University
Journalism	Columbia University, Univ. of Missouri, University of North Carolina
Mass Communication	Florida State University
Journalism & Mass Comm. (concentration media mgt.)	Arizona State University
Media Management	University of Miami
Media Studies	Ball State University
Radio, Television and Film	Univ. of Texas, Univ. of North Texas
Telecommunications	Ohio Univ., Indiana Univ., Penn State, Univ. of Florida, Univ. of Kentucky, Bowling Green,
Telecommunications Arts	University of Georgia
Telecommunications, Information Studies & Media	Michigan State University
Telecommunications & Information Management	Western Michigan University
Telecommunications Systems Management	Murray State University

We in the field of media and telecommunications are quite diverse both programmatically as well as how we present ourselves externally to the general public. It is not surprising, therefore, that human resource (HR) officials representing some of America's best companies routinely demonstrate a lack of familiarity regarding the preparation and educational training that

goes into a media, telecommunications or digital media arts degree. Even worse, is the fact that many of our own colleges and universities do not fully understand what we do. Does such diversity in program name and description pose a problem to us as educators and scholars in the field? Yes.

Finding Common Ground

The study of media and telecommunications management is a relatively new field in comparison to programs in traditional management, broadcasting and computer science. Most universities and colleges offer specific courses in media or telecommunications management, programming and/or economics. The focus of such courses can differ significantly. A media management course taught at the University of Florida or Georgia is likely to focus on broadcasting and cable. A telecommunications course taught at Western Michigan University or Murray State University may give equal or greater emphasis to telephony and data networking.

In 2004, the BEA management and sales division hosted a panel session entitled *Media & Telecommunications Management: Finding Common Ground Between Curricular Approaches*. At that time, several noted scholars were asked to consider such curriculum issues as: How does the teaching of media or telecommunications management fit into a larger media/telecommunications curriculum strategy? Panelists were also asked to present their basic approach to the teaching of media and telecommunications management in terms of course outline, programmatic areas of emphasis and abiding philosophy.

Table 2. presents a sampling of 12 universities, including the name of the institution, course title and course number. What is interesting to note is the wide variation in course titles and programmatic emphasis. It is my firm belief that such diversity in course title and

description tends to weaken what we do as educators and scholars. The variation in course title creates a public perception that the field of media and telecommunications management is neither consistent or rigorous in its approach to curriculum design.

Table 2.
Media & Telecommunications Management
University, Course Title & Listing

University	Course Title	Listing
Bowling Green State Univ.	Telecommunications Management	TCOM 455
Michigan State University	Telecommunication Management	TC 458
Ohio University	Electronic Media Management	TCOM 360
	Electronic Media Financial Mgt.	TCOM 461
Southern Illinois University	Radio Television Management	RT 473-3
University of Denver	Telecommunication Management	COMN 3000
University of Florida	Telecom. Planning & Operations	RTV 4800
University of Georgia	Media Programming & Management	TELE 3310
University of Kentucky	Media Organizations	TEL 504
University of Miami	Broadcast & Cable Management	CBR 402
University of North Texas	Broadcast & Cable Management	4430
University of Texas	Broadcast & Cable Management	RTVF 4430
Western Michigan University	Telecommunications Management	COM. 448

Organizational Structures

A related problem is that media management and telecommunication courses and programs are housed within a variety of organizational structures and settings. The teaching of media management and telecommunications is typically a course (or set of courses) that service a major or larger academic program, such as: 1) Communication. 2) Mass Communication 3) Media Studies, 4) Telecommunications and 5) Journalism. The challenge for anyone involved in curriculum design and planning is to develop a management major or concentration that can adapt (or coincide) with a variety of organizational structures. (See Table 3.)

Table 3.
Media & Telecommunications Management
Academic Organizational Structures
(Where Such Programs Reside)

University	School and Department	College
Indiana University Ohio University Penn. State University	Department of Telecommunications	College of Communication
University of Florida	Department of Telecommunications	College of Journalism & Telecommunications
University of Georgia	Department of Telecommunications	College of Journalism & Mass Communication
Michigan State University	Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies and Media	College of Communication Arts & Sciences
University of Denver	School of Communication	
Western Michigan University	School of Communication Telecom. & Information Management	College of Arts & Sciences
Bowling Green State University	School of Communication Studies Department of Telecommunications	
Arizona State University	School of Journalism & Mass Comm. Media Management	
University of North Texas	Department of Radio, Television & Film	
Southern Illinois University	Department of Radio & Television	College of Mass Communication & Media Arts

Why is this Important?

All too often, both the general public and industry are quick to rely on conventional names and program descriptions as a way to evaluate the programs we represent and our students. In a field as dynamic and ever changing as ours, the need for conventional labels can be very limiting given the unique set of management, journalistic and digital media arts skills that our students possess. Such misunderstanding can pose a serious problem for our students seeking employment; for those media and telecommunication companies that are routinely seeking qualified graduates and for many departments seeking support and recognition from university administrations that are unaware of the strength of our degree programs. The lack of pedagogical consistency weakens the strength of our degree programs in four ways.

1. is confusing to the general public (i.e. parents and prospective students)
2. is confusing to potential employers and human resource officials who are often unfamiliar with program titles and demonstrate a clear lack of understanding regarding the preparation and educational training that goes into a media, telecommunications or digital media arts degree. (I still have business contacts in the field who think that the best trained students are those with undergraduate business degrees.)
3. runs the risk of becoming marginalized by some of today's more well established university programs in such fields such as business and computer science. (No one confuses the meaning of an MBA or psychology degree)
4. undermines the advancement of our field both as educators and scholars. There seems to be a wide latitude of opinion regarding what constitutes a so called "core curriculum" in the field.

Part of the problem has to do with the evolution of the field itself. The once historic lines that separated, broadcasting, cable and telephony are no more. Today's telecommunications business environment presupposes a number of crossing over points where companies compete (and partner) to offer new and different kinds of information and entertainment services. Nowhere is this more evident than AOL's commitment to offer Voice Over IP telephony or Verizon's commitment to deliver broadband video services to its customers. Similarly, a large percentage of Americans now get their news from one of the established news websites such as USA Today or the New York Times.

Telecommunications education presupposes a number of crossing over points; that is, a number of subset fields that combine to make up the larger discipline. To that end, I offer what I call a telecommunications spectrum line. (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1.
Telecommunications Spectrum Line

Broadcasting Cable Internet Telephony Satellite & Wireless Intelligent Networking

Journalism - Electronic Commerce - Video

Recommendations

The field of media and telecommunications is at the center of the world's information economy. My concerns are about the future. It's about how to best train and educate tomorrow's media and telecommunication professionals. It starts with educators and business professionals working together to achieve consensus regarding the kind of core knowledge and experiential learning that makes sense for a 21st century education. In 2005, the BEA management & sales division will host two panel sessions that will look at media and telecommunications management curriculum. The first session entitled: *Media & Telecommunications Management: Defining the Core Curriculum* will bring together a number of noted educators and scholars to look at how technological change (and convergence patterns) are affecting the very nature of core curriculum in our discipline. The second panel session entitled: *Where Do We Go From Here?* is something of a call to action. It will be proposed at both BEA 2005 and AEJMC 2005 that a joint task force be formed between BEA and AEJMC to look at issues pertaining to media and telecommunications management curriculum.

A proposed BEA/AEJMC joint sponsored task force is an attempt to achieve greater coherence in curriculum design and planning affecting those programs that offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in media, telecommunications management and electronic media arts. Based upon a proposed curriculum planning conference (and subsequent meetings) I would expect there to emerge five important outcomes. They include:

1. Greater consensus regarding what constitutes a core curriculum for those programs offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in media, telecommunications and digital media arts.
2. An agreement in principle in terms of program title and description

3. Greater consensus regarding the ways to improve the external marketing of such programs to the general public as well as industry
4. Greater consensus regarding the ways to improve academic/industry relations
5. Greater consensus regarding the ways to improve scholarship in the field.

As a first step, what if in the teaching of media and telecommunications management we were to make a basic distinction between those programs that emphasize media management (i.e. broadcasting, cable & journalism) and those programs that emphasize information management (i.e. voice, data, intelligent networking). There are admittedly a number of crossing over points between the two areas. But for purposes of basic organization; the former programs might be entitled *Telecommunications & Media Management* (TMM) and the latter programs might be called *Telecommunications & Information Management* (TIM).

It so happens that in the past two years I have been involved in the start up of a new academic organization called the International Telecommunications Education Research Association (ITERA). (see <http://www.itera.org/>) On our website, is a listing of various TMM and TIM programs that specialize in media and information management. The listing is incomplete to be sure. But its larger significance is an attempt to help organize that vast discipline we call telecommunications. In addition, the same website lists a variety of academic, industry and governmental agencies involved in the field of media and telecommunications. I invite you to take a look when you have a moment and to be a part of this important discussion on curriculum as we move forward. In the end, students graduating in the field of media and telecommunications should feel confident in the value of their degree. And likewise, business and industry should have a clear understanding regarding the kind of training and experience they can expect from our graduates.