

There is no such thing as a ‘convergence continuum’: Aiming towards the perfect solution

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Media convergence is reshaping news production. Could you briefly describe the development?

Newsrooms are very different from what they were only a decade ago. Convergence is a fast ongoing change process redefining news production in all its details: finding new digital ways of gathering and sharing information, organising integration processes within the newsrooms and tailoring news production differently for various channels. Throughout Europe and the USA we can see different models of newsroom organisation. This is due to

national traditions in journalism and different media legislation. The type of legislation will determine whether integration processes and media cross ownership including TV, radio, print media and all kinds of digital operations, will either speed up, slow down or otherwise be restricted. Another key factor in defining the speed and speed limits for convergence processes in the newsroom is, of course, the level of internet penetration in the markets. In Europe, the fastest convergence and integration processes are found in the Northern countries. In contrast, in central European countries such as Germany and Austria, the discussion is still at a very early stage with many media companies currently starting their own newsroom integration and rethinking their business models. In southern Europe, there are fewer limitations to media cross ownership allowing early convergence processes in national and regional markets to integrate local radio and TV. We could define many convergence descriptors in a matrix model to understand the different status of newsroom developments (see Carvajal et al. (2009)). Roughly speaking we come across 3 models:

One is the “Coordination of different platforms” model which means that there are almost no integration processes in the newsrooms yet. However, on a company’s business level, strategies for different media channels are being discussed and measures such as commercial cooperation, content sharing or cross marketing have been implemented. It is interesting to see that in central Europe some of the most economically successful online operations are not integrated at all into their company’s traditional newsrooms; for example Spiegel online in Germany or Der Standard.at in Austria. One might assert that they could grow at eye level with print especially because they could develop far away from traditionalist worry lines. Their next steps of convergence versus splendid isolation will be interesting.

Another model is “Cross media” which involves pushing processes on a company level, in newsroom organisations and also journalistic processes to integrate parts of all media platforms. A high percentage of managers and leading editors have to be multi-skilled and well prepared in order to steer cross media production. A steadily growing percentage of the journalistic staff are working bi-media, be it print/online or radio/TV (as many did before the digital age) or TV/online etc. Many big and small news operations might be assigned to this model, among them the big BBC with its attempts to inspire the radio/TV/online newsroom in London with real integrated life in news production. It’s a mission that will not be completed for many years. Another good example is Unidad Editorials media house in Madrid with its flagship *El Mundo*. Three years ago it merged its online staff in managing the biggest news website for the Spanish-speaking world with its many hundreds of journalist and producers of Spain’s second largest newspaper. The processes of integration are accepted as a permanent struggle for more cross media understanding and production. In the tradition of Spain’s great author Antonio Machado: “Paths are made by walking.”

The last model is of “Full integration” in the newsroom, which does of course not exist in its pure form. Some role models have that high pretension, such as the *Daily Telegraph’s* newsroom with 800 journalists behind Victoria Station which is a demo object

developed by the world association IFRA. Others on smaller regional levels, means that radio and local TV can come closer to the ideal model, like the Danish *Nordjyske Stiftstidene* with almost all journalists working at least bi-media for about ten years. This is after the introduction of an integrated newsroom including daily print, weeklies and online.

The Swiss Ringier newsroom for “Blick” that opened in 2010 may also be considered as a good result of a well-structured convergence process of print and online. An important finding is that there is no such thing as a “convergence continuum” (see Dailey et al. (2005)) aiming towards the perfect solution. There is a permanent change, faster than ever, driven by digitisation as one key factor. However newsroom processes depend on different national and cultural limiting factors under specific company framework and do not necessarily all lead towards fully converged media organisation with fully integrated newsrooms.

What is the influence of convergent newsroom structures on interactive and participatory communication strategies? What role can organisational structures play in supporting audience participation?

Revealing the MP expenses scandal was the *Daily Telegraph’s* most important scoop in 2009 shortly after moving into the new newsroom. Leading journalists commonly liked to emphasise back then in the converged newsroom, with its many digital channels to communicate with readers and users which had made the success even bigger. Reactions of journalists had become faster than ever and helped to encourage readers and users to comment on their regional MP’s performance. Commenters discussed questions of corruption in democracy which were fundamentally raised by the *Telegraph’s* story which revealed how politicians had exploited the system of parliamentary allowances. Interaction with the users made it much easier to sell the daily newspaper and even books summarising the scandal.

The *Telegraph’s* competitor, The *Guardian*, reacted quickly and demonstrated how to improve and intelligently use the new interactive possibilities. It put all the thousands of MPs expense papers, bills and receipts online and asked its users to help analyse them. It can be considered the first case of crowd sourcing for the support of a newspaper’s journalistic investigation in such dimensions: Many thousands of The *Guardian’s* readers commented on these documents online, revealing more “fiddled” expenses and doubtful receipts. This fitted into The *Guardian’s* “digital first” strategy of being on the cutting edge of participatory communication with its readers.

In 2009, The *Guardian* and its Sunday paper The *Observer* had moved into a completely new, integrated, somehow stylish newsroom. Its editor, Alan Rusbridger, later presented himself as one of the prophets of the digital age, motivating his staff to follow and for his readers to join in. Today, so called SMOs (social media optimisers) work as specialists, training the staff in communicating with the audience and attracting them. Such processes are still relatively new, but obviously the companies and their management

policies are the most important factors in defining whether responsive audiences and interactivity are encouraged and how new interactive projects will be supported.

***In your opinion, is there a change in journalists' attitudes towards interactivity?
(Connecting with the audience as a benefit of online journalism)***

What we see is a transition process. For many journalists, the integration of audiences, communication on eye level with the formerly passive reader or viewer is still more irritating than motivating. Making one's way into social media platforms is even more complicated. Also media law makers do not know yet how to regulate the new phenomena. One more example is Austria's public national broadcaster ORF, where it is forbidden by law to launch or officially participate in social media platforms and channels like Facebook or Twitter.

We know and take into account that since 2 or 3 years ago, a fast growing percentage of traditional media content is only found because of recommending links and "Likes" of friends in social media. For some media platforms, users' comments in social media and weblogs already provoke more traffic than Google or smaller search engines. In the case of the Austrian parliament's social media ban for the ORF, this means that the national public broadcaster is officially cut off from important parts of its audience, especially the younger users, listeners and viewers.

Of course the individual journalist's attitude towards interactivity in the professional process has been changing. It has increasingly been welcomed and even seen as an enormous chance for new ways of journalism, with specifically trained staff and digital interactivity, as a permanent part of life. These are new chances for both the fresh generation coming from universities and journalism schools, as well as the open minded experienced journalists with curiosity and mid-career training. This is not only a question of age, journalists with many years in the newsroom and experience in mass communication may be more deliberative when analysing the latest fashion. But companies and societies interested in quality journalism have to offer them programs for further training in order to see such new developments as early as possible.

Once again as a superficial short analysis, societies with a high quality level of educational systems in general, do also offer better training opportunities for professional communicators. When we look into Scandinavian newsrooms we will find many well prepared journalists who understand new digital developments, convergence processes and new forms of interactivity. Those journalists see mid-career training as a permanent part of their professional development.

In Austria, for many decades there have not been any attempts to train journalists. This has only changed as a result of new initiatives during the last few years. There still is almost no kind of journalism training in eastern European countries. There is no financial aid for that. In southern Europe we can often find divided worlds of journalism offering very good programs, research results and training for the elite in the media and people, while

leaving many others far behind. It is like the educational system in general. This might produce an army of low skilled labourers in the media industries who will not be able to catch up with the needs of their profession, nor of their users. But all of them can see and feel the paradigm shift towards interactivity with a high valuation of user participation. With our team of “Medienhaus Wien,” we are participating in an EU funded international study comparing “Media Accountability” in 13 European and Arabic countries, from Britain to Tunisia. One outcome of our empirical survey which is still ongoing, reveals that journalists in most of the selected countries consider audiences online commentaries on ethical and quality standards as increasingly important. One can also find more and more innovative instruments complementing traditional media accountability instruments (see Eberwein et al. (2011)).

If you compare newspapers in different countries, are there differences in content production by the user?

There are many different cultural traditions and political meanings of communication. One example we all found to be most interesting and fascinating, was on how mobile content helped to organise the Arab Spring. Talking with social media managers of leading independent Arab media, such as *Al Masry* in Egypt, are not too convinced that important protest channels in the uprising against the old regime, will help to build a new, more democratic, more open society. Germans simultaneously might see of course the remarkable differences in tone and analysis of user content, criticising the German president in FAZ.net compared to BILD.de. Therefore differences in user content production are also a mirror of the state of democracy, of media landscapes and different interaction strategies in societies. Austria’s biggest news media website *derstandard.at* allowed user comments from the very beginning, in the mid-1990s, below every journalistic article. Today several ten thousands of user comments come in every day with an enormous user community producing interesting information, but also including foolish and even rude abuse, or simply a terribly stupid bashing of politicians. This is difficult, yes almost impossible to moderate.

This is less common in Scandinavia where one might assume that bad behaviour and personal insult is also less common offline there. Even with that possibility of more educated and less abusive tradition of political discussions, the internet pioneers in northern Europe, e.g. from the Bonnier group, never liked the idea of having user comments posted on the same platform right underneath the professional’s article. You will find that also in Spain. Another country, another tradition: There always was the concept of “Tertulia”, where a century ago was where intellectual public discussions were held in a coffee house. Over the last few decades people have been overfed with “Tertulias” on the radio, many of them far from intellectual or even quite the contrary. User discussions online that are sometimes loud, rude and childish, adds just one more channel to many other forms of hot tempered public debate which already existed.

Maybe here is one of the keys for the future of journalism, combining a maximum of interactivity, integrating user's knowledge and content ideas with an honest desire to understand the audience, at the same time combining it with the highest possible standards in journalistic investigation and storytelling. This needs a newsroom organisation open to permanent change and development. Some media, like the *Guardian* are working on that however, in the end it is again about the differentiation of professional work from user content. Let me add a personal comment after visiting dozens of European newsrooms. I am very much in favour of seeing Brecht's theory of the radio (see Brecht (1989)) becoming partly true. Everybody should be enabled to be a sender, but as soon as we think that amateur weblogs and user contents in general are more interesting, amusing and worst case more accurate than the information provided by traditional news organisations, then journalism as we know it is in real trouble.

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