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Technology and Communication: An examination of media convergence

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The face of journalism is changing. Its countenance has evolved continuously since the invention of moveable type by Johannes Gutenberg circa 1450. With the introduction of each new medium, mild chaos has ensued. Journalism has grown from print to include radio, network television, cable television and the Internet. The current media trend mixes the traditional with the online in a recipe for media convergence. Some journalists worry that convergence will spawn too many conflicts of interest (Morton, 2000), and homogenize the news. (Hoyt, 1997) Others embrace the increased options for reporting and retrieving news. (Shepard, 2000) Regardless of opinion, most journalists agree media convergence is inevitable. Already, seventeen percent of people who use online sources for news stated in a recent Pew Research Center for People & the Press survey that they use traditional media sources less often than before going online for news. The survey results also indicate that among college graduates under 50 years of age, 23 percent say they “principally depend on the Internet for national and international news.” (Kohut, 2000)

The Media Go Online

The media are responding to these consumer demands for online news as evidenced by the Tribune, Co. the parent company of the Chicago Tribune and other media outlets. “By fall 1997, the Tribune Co. was deeply committed to the Internet, as well as to the notion of having its newspapers work closely with broadcast and cable television in places where Tribune owned both...Tribune executives were far ahead of other media companies in understanding how technology was quickly changing ways people get their news.” (Shepard, 2000) Clicking through cable channels or searching for news online, a media consumer can quickly see that many newspapers, magazines and television outlets have followed the Tribune into the online news frontier. According to a Columbia Journalism Review report, 93 percent of printed publications have a Web site, and in February 2000 8.6 million unique visitors were recorded at MSNBC.com, putting it among the most visited sites on the Web. (McNamara, 2000) Thus news operations are entering uncharted territory; they are learning to integrate the media as they go. No one has all of the answers, but several leaders are working to create a converged media marketplace.

Media professionals are focused on discovering how journalists will create stories in this new arena. Most online sites began as “shovelware,” which is the reusing of information already provided on TV or in the newspaper. (Colon, 2000) However, the Web has become a significant source of online news.

Reportedly 30 percent of Americans get news online at least once a week, with 12 percent saying they read online news daily. (Kohut, 2000) These users expect more than a rehash of the morning edition; current users are looking for additional stories and points of view, breaking news, interactive stories, and streaming audio and video. Editors are trying to decide which type of outlet it would be best served by a story before it is assigned. “The idea now is to conceive the stories from the beginning based on how you will distribute them. ... The theory is we’ll look at every story idea and try to figure out what are the best ways to use it,” Mark Hinojosa, assistant managing editor for electronic news at the Chicago Tribune said. (Shepard, 2000) Keith Wheeler, the Orlando Sentinel’s deputy managing editor for multimedia said, “Ideally, a print reporter will go out on a story and think ahead of time how it might work for television, as opposed to thinking after the story is written, ‘Oh gosh, now I gotta do television.’” (Shepard, 2000)

Audience Theory

With so many options, the media professionals are discovering more about the audiences’ news habits in order to give them the news they need and want in the form they desire it. David Card, senior media analyst at Jupiter Communications said “The key here, with different media channels in operation, is to own an audience across each of those channels, watch how they move among

them and provide appropriate content.” (Wagner, 2000) In other words, a converged media operation must know who the members of its audience are and how they use each of the media. Then the reporters and editors must decide how their audiences will want to receive different types of information – online, printed or broadcast. ABCNews senior vice president and general manager of ABCNews.com Bernie Gershon seemingly agrees with Card’s theory. Regarding the large amount of online coverage given the 2000 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles Gershon said, “We already have a substantial user base. If you are going to spend a large portion of your budget on a Web site with no association with a major broadcasting network, it may not be cost-effective.” (Teinowitz, 2000) The same may be said of association with a major newspaper. During the convention, the *Los Angeles Times* Web site had audio analysis by *Times* reporters, pictures from a 360-degree camera and a searchable database of the convention speeches after they were given. (Teinowitz, 2000) Dirk Mathison, political editor for latimes.com said “The idea was, instead of talking about synergism, to really synergize by doing a Web broadcast featuring political reporters from all the publications getting together each day.” (Teinowitz, 2000) Many other established news organizations offered Web coverage of the convention, including CNN, ABCNews, Fox News and NBC News. Even Psuedo.com, an Internet-only media outlet, found a partner in George magazine to

provide coverage of the convention, including twelve hours of live video.(Teinowitz, 2000)

Content Sharing

The idea of content sharing among news outlets has become increasingly popular in national and large media markets. Wagner said “Content sharing can potentially benefit all sides.” (Wagner, 2000) In the five months following the content-sharing deal announced by MSNBC, Newsweek and The Washington Post in November 1999 more than 100 appearances had been logged by Newsweek correspondents on MSNBC cable news programs. In another joint effort Civia Tamkrkin, executive producer of the weekly “CNN & Time” broadcast production said, “When John F. Kennedy Jr.’s plane went down, I was on the phone with time Deputy Managing Editor Jim Kelly pooling resources, so my producers and the Time correspondents were sharing sources, information and background as everyone raced against a deadline.” (Wagner, 2000) “This cross-fertilization of cable and print is a sign of what’s expected to be an increasingly tight collaboration of TV and online outlets as deals evolve.” (Wagner, 2000)

This collaboration has journalists wondering if this means the end of their respective specializations. “Rather than having their newspeople working for just one medium, the company [Tribune] sees possibilities for converging their different new operations and thereby multiplying the number of platforms through

which they distribute the news simultaneously.” (Colon, 2000) For example, at the Chicago Tribune, newspaper reporters create and appear on packages for WFLA-TV; meanwhile WFLA-TV reporters write by-lined stories for the Tribune.(Colon, 2000) Most criticism of media convergence from within the business focuses on journalists being expected to do too much and the quality of their work suffering. Media outlets must recognize this possibility. Editors at the Tribune say they do not expect their journalists to do “everything, and each journalist has the right to refuse to do a story outside his or her primary medium.” (Shepard, 2000) As a safeguard to quality journalism, the company says it will still hire journalists with strong broadcast skills and strong writing skills and strong Web skills. Shepard says that eventually editors expect to have growing numbers of reporters who will be able to create stories for all three types of media. (Shepard, 2000)

Conclusion

Technology has changed the way Americans get their news. Audiences are flocking to the Web to find their news. Cable channels and print outlets are partnering with each other and creating Web sites of their own. In the midst of a sea change, the media are discovering ways to compete. A few theories have been tested by the early adopters of this new converged media paradigm, and new theories are being tested now. Some experiments have failed, others fuel the

growing fire surrounding online media. None of it has been easy. Gil Thelen, the Tribune's executive editor and vice president, said, "Convergence is a contact sport. It happens one staff collision at a time." (Colon, 2000)

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