

Media convergence and the battle for the audience

GENÍS ROCA

Partner Director of RocaSalvatella

genis@rocasalvatella.com

Abstract

Media convergence has been written about for the last 25 years, almost always from a very inward-looking standpoint, on how digital technology and the internet phenomenon are changing professional profiles and altering the ways in which content is produced and distributed. The real challenge for the media, however, is not internal but in the market, and involves attending to the different moments of consumption of the same user. This will require multiple platforms on a range of supports and devices, where the real integration is that of the intangibles (brand, credibility, trust), and whose aim is to obtain more audience, lock in their loyalty even when using different channels, and improve their segmentation.

Key words: media convergence, digital convergence, moment of consumption, media group, audience.

Resum

La convergència dels mitjans ha estat tractada per diferents autors al llarg dels darrers 25 anys, gairebé sempre amb una mirada molt interna sobre com la tecnologia digital i el fenomen d'internet modifiquen el perfil dels professionals i alteren les maneres de produir i distribuir els continguts. El veritable repte dels mitjans, però, no és intern sinó de mercat i consisteix a atendre els diferents moments de consum d'un mateix usuari. Per aconseguir-ho cal disposar de múltiples plataformes en diferents suports i dispositius, en què la veritable integració és la dels intangibles (marca, credibilitat, confiança) i l'objectiu és obtenir més audiència, fidelitzar-la malgrat que utilitzi diferents canals i millorar-ne la segmentació.

Paraules clau

Convergència dels mitjans, convergència digital, moment de consum, grup de mitjans, audiència.

On the concept of media convergence

The process of reflection on media convergence considerably predates the present explosion of digital technologies, the internet and the network times we live in. The earliest academic reference dates from 1983, when Ithiel de Sola Pool¹ (1917-1984), founder of MIT's Political Science Department, published *The Technologies of Freedom*. Pool had studied Nazi and Communist propaganda and had already seen the relationship between communications and politics. Among his contributions² is the idea of a convergence that "is blurring the lines between media, even between point-to-point communications, such as the post, telephone and telegraph, and mass communications, such as the press, radio, and television (...). So the one-to-one relationship that used to exist between a medium and its use is eroding". Pool was a visionary, and Henry Jenkins,³ until recently Director of the MIT Comparative Media Studies Program and considered the present-day McLuhan, calls him the "prophet of convergence".⁴

But Pool's holistic and social vision became blurred by the force with which the new technologies were developing. In 1995 Nicholas Negroponte published his *Being Digital*, and popularised a line of argument somewhat marked by technological determinism. He claimed that the changeover from

analogue to digital supports was the reason behind the convergence of media and content that would change communications and society. It seemed that convergence would mean the concentration of all devices in one, probably a computer, and that this would be the only port of consumption for any medium - printed press, television, radio or cinema. However that was not all: convergence would not only be seen in consumer technology but also in productive technology. Everything was turning digital, and the same tools were being used for writing in digital newspapers and their printed equivalents. Technology and the tools derived from it were the cause, and convergence was the result.

This view is still very much to the fore in many of the analyses made, but another key concept has been incorporated: the economy. In a recent article,⁵ journalist Juan Varela explains that media convergence is the only solution in a scenario where loss of income has combined with the appearance of new competitors who are investing much less in creating quality content. Information is expensive and it is difficult to be profitable giving general cover with tailor-made content while competing against simple compilers or the increasingly frequent hyper-specialised niche proposals. In spite of this, Frédéric Filloux, French director of the Norwegian group Schibsted (publisher of the *20 Minutos* free newspaper in

Spain) had already explained⁶ that if convergence was only technological then perhaps it would not be the solution to the media's economic ills. According to Filloux's calculations, the main European and American dailies needed a volume of income that they could never achieve on the internet. With current income from advertising on the internet (between 0.15 and 0.30 euros per unique visitor per month), an editorial team of 100 would need more than eight million unique visitors per month to be able to meet its costs. According to Varela,⁷ in 2007 *El País* obtained eight euros of advertising income per reader and month, whereas Prisacom (which produces Elpaís.com and all the group's other web sites) only managed 0.21 euros in advertising per unique visitor per month. Vocento, leader in the regional press, obtained 6.15 euros per month per reader, while the group's web pages brought in 0.30 euros per unique visitor per month. So if convergence is nothing more than a change from analogue to digital, the future looks very uncertain. Media convergence cannot be explained as just the incorporation of new technologies to deal with times of crisis.

In 2003 Ramón Salaverría, Universitat de Navarra, was already asking for a broader view be taken.⁸ As he saw it, when discussing media convergence, four dimensions have to be considered:

- **Entrepreneurial dimension:** communications companies are diversifying, and even within the same group we find different media that require to be coordinated both economically and editorially, all the more so now that the arrival of the internet has forced us to take a fresh look at our models.

- **Technological dimension:** the technology associated with the internet favours separate organisation of online staff, equipped with their own tools and not coordinated from the main editorial team. Efforts are now being made to resolve this by re-integration. Current content management solutions involve a single editorial team that can handle multiple platforms.

- **Professional dimension:** new profiles are coming in - more multi-tasking (research, composition, editing, layout, illustration, publication) and more multi-channel work (writing for both digital and paper editions, taking part in radio chat programmes, running a blog etc.).

- **Communicative dimension:** the internet allows integration of previously separate communications codes (audiovisual with television, auditory with radio, textual with press), also bringing in new options like simulators, infographics, 3-D reproductions etc.

According to Salaverría, these four dimensions are at different levels of development. In his opinion, although the first two (entrepreneurial and technological) have been around for 20 years, the professional and above all communicative dimensions are much newer and the challenge for companies is to develop them properly.

Audiences and media convergence

Broadly, Negroponete, Valera, Filloux and Salaverría view media convergence as a phenomenon that arises from technology, economics, management and professional evolution. But what all their analyses have in common is that they focus on media companies and professionals rather than on their audiences.

These days, all users of the different media can afford their access costs. Anyone can buy a newspaper, listen to the radio, watch television, access the internet, download a podcast etc. The real problem is having time to access the content. So now it is users' time rather than their money that the media are competing for. This is known as the *economics of attention*.

True convergence is what happens inside each consumer. The strategy is to bring together the moments of time they spend with us, moments that we have no option but to service through different media which then converge in the user and his or her multiple social interactions. The most important issue is not that consumers produce information but that they process it on multiple supports and metabolise it collectively, giving rise to some not very linear and so far little known forms of reading, which Henry Jenkins calls *transmedia storytelling*.

In these days of social networks and transmedia storytelling, media convergence is not so much concerned with integrating multiple devices in one or with magic formulae against the crisis, to cite two of the most frequently repeated arguments. In Jenkins' words: "the old idea of convergence was that all devices would converge into one central device that did everything for you. What we are now seeing is that hardware is diverging while content converges".⁹ Far from being "all-in-one", media convergence is using multiple supports and tools, and is distributing content on a whole range of channels. The only part of the issuing medium that survives in this process is its brand. In media convergence, consumers are being transformed and the media reduced to a brand.

Jenkins talks about convergence as the media's "big bang", where old and new media clash, popular and corporate media are crossed, producer's and consumer's powers are combined, but all in ways that are impossible to predict. This is not just a context in which consumers are now known as *prosumers* because they also produce content, but a whole new environment, where consumption must be seen as a collective process and a cultural dynamic.

As Jenkins says, old media never die. No new medium kills its predecessor. TV will not disappear as a medium, nor will newspapers, but they will certainly change how they use technologies to produce and distribute their content. One example could be the soon-to-arrive mobile television: what little we have at the moment consists of a mobile adaptation of content created for conventional television (for example *TV3minutes*),¹⁰ but these are only rehearsals for more specific productions. The same thing happened with on-line newspapers: at first they only published the printed edition in on-line support, but now

all major newspapers have digital versions where the print edition is only a marginal part of their offer.

As might be expected, in this new context the individual media are losing ground and media groups are taking over. Their ability to coordinate printed, audiovisual and digital media under the same roof makes it more likely that groups can attend to each user at his or her different moments of consumption. In this regard, the media groups Prisa, Planeta and the Godó Group have been systematically mapping a range of media to ensure their presence across radio, television, press and the internet. Conversely, the major public channels including RTVE (Spanish) and CCMA (Catalan) are closely focussed on radio and television and have are poorly represented in the other media, which may lead to problems in their attempts to serve their audience at different moments of consumption.

The media and the convergence of intangibles

The main asset of any medium is its brand, ahead of its production processes or its technology. Creating a brand that its audience associates with specific values is difficult and expensive, and the best way to make it pay its way is to exploit it across all available platforms (the internet, television, the printed press etc.), supports (audio, video, text etc.) and devices (computers, mobile telephones, DTT, DVD, cinemas etc.). This is the most strategic option: to construct identifying values that can be recognised in any channel. Meanwhile economies of scale and technical or organisational synergies are merely the logical optimisation of operations and costs common to every activity.

The more visible the brand and the more moments of consumption it is associated with, the more powerful its deployment. If a communications offer aims to become our first-choice option it will have to be at our side every morning when we are eating our breakfast (newspaper?), driving to work (radio station?), while at work (segmented RSS?), talking to friends (mobile phone?) or in the evening after dinner (television?). Every time the brand misses one of these moments of consumption, it runs the risk of its user finding a more comprehensive alternative.

In the media, technical and economic convergence are operational matters only relevant to internal organisation. While they affect how the media organise and create content, on their own they offer no guarantee of a strategy to deal with customers' moments of consumption. The media should not be interpreting the concept of convergence by looking inwards, but by looking outwards, at the audience that they wish to service and its increasing mobility and capacity to access information in multiple formats. That is, they must stop seeing convergence as just technical or economic engineering and start harnessing it for servicing customers and gaining their loyalty.

The battle of the audience ... and segmentation

Some years ago, Chris Anderson¹¹ developed the concept of *long tail*¹² to explain that in today's context of digital products and low transaction costs, what makes niche proposals so interesting is their potential world market, making profits for initiatives that would not have been viable in the local market. Anderson continues to be a lucid and outspoken interpreter of the network society and digital progress and their affect on business strategies. In 2008 he published a new and highly influential article¹³ in which he argues that service provision must be free for the end user. The internet has made users accustomed to not paying for most of the services they enjoy: a powerful search engine, electronic address, space to publish videos, option of a personal blog, access to specific content etc. This is already the norm in radio and television stations, which do not try to make money directly from audiences but seek audiences to attract advertising, although the digital press, for example, has repeatedly tried to make readers pay to access certain content, with poor results.

When service is free for the end user the media are plunged into an audience war, conducted over two variables that must go hand in hand: volume and segmentation. Interest is declining in both volume without segmentation and extensive segmentation without minimum volume. So putting together Anderson's two concepts, initiatives must be free and for long-tail markets.

When viewed as a strategy for satisfying each user's different moments of consumption, media convergence can also become a strategy for improving segmentation (of users but also of their moments of consumption). This in turn will lead to improved exploitation of advertising and better economic returns. A media group that knows who consumes parts of its content, and at which specific moments, will not only be better placed to orientate its formats and their editorial treatment, but will also be more attractive for the business models that will make it viable.

Notes

- 1 <http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/profiles/profile_ithiel.html>
- 2 <<http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/etheredge.html>>
- 3 <<http://www.henryjenkins.org>>
- 4 <<http://books.google.com/books?id=RIRVNikT06YC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Convergence+Culture&ei=dMciSZ7IOJSWMOzA1IMD>>
- 5 <http://www.soitu.es/soitu/2008/10/01/sociedadcableada/1222857641_723544.html>
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- 7 <http://www.soitu.es/soitu/2008/10/01/sociedadcableada/1222857641_723544.html>
- 8 <<http://chasqui.comunica.org/81/salaverria81.htm>>
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- 11 <http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Anderson>
- 12 <<http://www.thelongtail.com>>
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