

# The convergence of newsrooms in the era of the open garden

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### Abstract

*The digitalisation of information production and the consolidation of the internet as a tool of social communication have completely transformed the "walled garden" of the traditional media. In this context, convergence has turned out to be a media strategy to take on the challenges to journalism in this new digital, interactive and multimedia scenario. However, such convergence demands technological development, integrated newsrooms and multi-skilled journalists in order to be successful in traditional media and to become, therefore, a sustainable business model in the "open garden" of internet communication.*

### Key words

*Convergence, Internet, media, integration, journalism.*

### Resum

*La digitalització de la producció informativa i la consolidació d'internet com a eina de comunicació social han transformat el "jardí tancat" dels mitjans de comunicació tradicionals. La convergència s'erigeix en aquest context en una estratègia dels mitjans per afrontar el repte del periodisme en un nou entorn digital, interactiu i multimèdia. Aquesta convergència, però, exigeix desenvolupaments tecnològics, redaccions integrades i periodistes polivalents per tal que es porti a terme amb bons resultats al mitjans tradicionals i es converteixi, per tant, en un model de negoci sostenible al "jardí obert" de la comunicació a internet.*

### Paraules clau

*Convergència, internet, mitjans, integració, periodisme.*

*"The era of the walled garden is over [...] Future success on the Internet is about overcoming traditional thinking."*

**Arthur Sulzberger Jr,**

editor de *The New York Times*

The digitalisation of information production and the consolidation of the internet as a means of social communication and support for the distribution of content have altered the templates of the traditional media. Newspapers, radio and television have left behind their analogue and *monomèdia* conception (Alves 2008) to advance towards their consolidation as digital and multimedia media. These days, there is no traditional means of communication that, besides their specific distribution channel, does not use the internet as a support for distributing content. This phenomenon – which some authors call the passage from the *linear medium* to the *network medium* (Singer 2008) – entails far-reaching transformations in the structure, organisation, relationship with the audience and the very business of the media.

By way of synthesis, the implications of the emergence of the internet in the media panorama can be studied from three essential perspectives (Sancha 2005):

- Internet as a source of information. The relationship with sources and the existence of information sources on the internet has changed professional routines in modern journalism.

- Internet as a platform of dissemination. It is within this sphere that the concept of multimedia acquires its meaning, as it obliges the traditional media to adapt their content to the characteristics of a new communication support.

- Internet as a channel for relationship with the audience. Users use the internet to relate actively with the medium, taking part in the same communicative discourse and altering it.

In this context of transformation, convergence has become a polysemic concept, a sort of "in" word (Masdeu 2008), an objective, a trend and an excuse for those traditional media that are seeking to take on the challenges of the new digital and multimedia context by latching on to convergence processes without really knowing why. In these processes, we find plans to cut costs, to reduce journalist staff, to avoid duplicating work, to improve information production, to streamline the relationship with the audience, to look for new markets, etc. There is no traditional medium that has not, to a greater or lesser extent, set up its own newsroom convergence or integration plan (Ifra 2008) to face the "challenges of twenty-first century journalism" (Domingo *et al.* 2007), an expression that has become commonplace.

With the aim of demarcating the object of study and of finding a definition that embraces the complexity of these phenomena, we could consider the concept of convergence put forward by the group of researchers on the "Digital Convergence in the Media-Technologies" project:

“A multidimensional process that, facilitated by the widespread implementation of digital telecommunication technologies, affects the technological, business, professional and editorial sphere of the media and augurs the integration of formerly disaggregated tools, spaces, work methods and languages so that journalists produce content distributed over multiple platforms through languages pertaining to each one.” (García Avilés *et al.* 2008)

In using this definition, it is important to note that convergence should be understood as a process, i.e. as a progressive phenomenon that includes both the media that have just adopted this strategy and those that display high levels of convergence in their structures. In this sense, the convergence continuum model of Dailey, Demo and Spillman (2003: 4) establishes five levels of cooperation in newsrooms that may help set levels of convergence:

- *Cross promotion*. The content of one medium is promoted in another. There is no collaboration between newsrooms.
- *Cloning*. The content of a medium is published without alteration on another support. The digital editions of some newspapers would be at this stage.
- *“Coopetition”*. There is collaboration through the sharing of information, but the own production of content is maintained. Cooperation and competition.
- *Content sharing*. The different media meet to exchange information and plan own content.
- *Full convergence*. This is full integration, where the different media share the assignments of subjects and work as a team to get the most out of each support.

The García Avilés definition of *convergence* described in this article already anticipates “digital telecommunication technologies” as an element facilitating this process. By contrast, there are many factors considered to be triggers or catalysts of media convergence. Schematically, we could cite the following:

- The decrease in the consumption of traditional media globally, in newspapers, radio and television.
- Audience fragmentation, with the distribution of users over different screens (television, mobile, computer, consoles, etc.).
- Greater competition for advertising revenue with the appearance of new actors on the communication scene.
- A progressive increase in the number of internet users, which makes it an increasingly more attractive market.
- The need to produce content for different supports and platforms in the same communication group.
- The deep-rooted nature of business concentration as a means of operation for multimedia groups.
- The consolidation of information as an ongoing service and not as a product managed in editions. Users want the information when and where they are at that time (here and now).

Despite the fact that the trends described so far present convergence as an inexorable and attractive trend for the media, it

would not be fair to complete this overview without referring to stances opposing convergence processes. Although it is true to say that the debate between newsroom integrationists and separatists appears to be coming down on the side of the former, numerous media directors still see drawbacks in having to compete on different supports with the same product. “You can’t win the 100 metres and the marathon at the same Olympics,” argues Torry Pedersen, managing director of *Verdens Gang*, the Norwegian newspaper that has decided to have separate newsrooms (Aunión 2008).

It is an opinion shared by Mario Tascón, former content director of Prisacom and present editor of Dixired. From his point of view, traditional and digital newsrooms are two worlds in conflict that work in different media and that require different professional profiles (Tascón 2007).

Over the following pages we will try to pose more elements of analysis of convergence processes. We will briefly tackle the role of technology as a necessary and decisive element in starting up convergence processes. We will see the effects of these integration processes on the newsroom structure and we will ascertain why the polyvalence of the journalist is fundamental in this context. Finally, we will ponder the business implications that result from these changes in the final part of the article.

### Technology as facilitator

The processes of convergence in newsrooms cannot be understood without the transformations that digitalisation has contributed in the tasks of information capture, production and distribution. Notwithstanding this, technology should be seen as a necessary and facilitating condition of convergence but not a trigger, a determinist bias maintained by the first theoretical approaches to convergence (Salaverría and García Avilés 2008: 33), but which has now been surpassed. There is a consensus in establishing convergence as a more complex process of triggers, as we have seen previously:

“Journalistic convergence should be tackled not as a technologically driven process but as a process that uses technological innovation to achieve specific objectives in certain environments. And this is the reason why each convergence project can have a different result.” (Domingo *et al.* 2007: 3)

From this perspective, we can use three technological convergence variables to explain in what way digitalisation has fostered integration processes in the media (Salaverría and García Avilés 2008: 36):

**1. Instrumental convergence.** The computer has become the essential instrument for journalism. Other devices, such as photo cameras, video cameras or mobiles, have become part of information routines, but it is the computer that has become the functional integrating element of journalism.

**2. Convergence of applications.** The media have devoted resources to defining Content Management Systems (SGC)

capable of integrating all the content available in their information production in the same application. Texts, videos, photos, graphics, audio files, documentation material, user-generated content, etc. share the same space and are organised in the same database to facilitate their multiplatform distribution.

The Vocento group, for example, has a multimedia SGC that shares all the group's newsrooms. Prisa.com, the digital division of the Prisa group, has developed an SGC that uses all the group's web pages (newspaper, radio and television media), which allows its flagship, *El País*, to have audio and video resources from other media of the group to offer them on its website. Similarly, we should highlight the SGC used by the Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (CCMA), which has a fairly powerful content repository to offer the videos of the broadcasts of the different television channels live and a la carte and, moreover, distribute this content on different digital platforms, such as the internet, telephone and interactive television (Domingo *et al.* 2007).

**3. Multiplatform distribution.** The ability to distribute digitalised content on multiple supports is one of the principal and most evident effects of the technological convergence of the media (Salaverría and García Avilés 2008: 37). It is a question of having the necessary technical infrastructure to distribute the content on any platform. They are platforms to which the integration of networks is providing new devices that call for new versions of the content to be designed and offered to the users. This is the case, for example, of the new Apple 3G iPhone, which has led websites like that of *El País* to have versions for mobile, PDAs, multimedia consoles such as PSP and now also a specific version for the iPhone.

One of the most attractive case studies from this perspective is that of the Agència Catalana de Notícies (ACN). Since it was founded in 1999, the ACN has been committed to incorporating technology as a work and distribution tool of its content.

"When an editor takes on the challenge of working for the ACN, they receive a backpack that includes their work tools (a laptop computer, a mobile telephone, a minidisc for recording digital audio, a microphone, a photo camera and a video camera). [...] They become multi-format editors capable of producing and adapting the information to the different supports (write a text, attach a voice clip, photos and, if necessary, record a video, semi-edit it and also post it on the net." (Gordillo and Nogué 2008: 53)

It is an innovative model that calls for a high degree of knowledge of the technology by the editor – who even takes on functions until now assigned to technicians – who not only requires the ability to capture the news event in multi-format but also has the responsibility for choosing what multimedia treatment each piece of information requires and how it should be distributed. This is a model that, besides the technological skills, calls for new ways of thinking and structuring the newsroom.

## The integrated newsroom

Media newsrooms have adapted their organisation chart to the degree of convergence of their operation. As we mentioned earlier, newsroom integration should be understood as a process with various stages of development, from the low level of convergence, where independent newsrooms occasionally collaborate, to the development of forms of full convergence, where all the journalists share the same space that produces content for different supports (Domingo *et al.* 2007: 4).

These situations are not only in response to a change in the physical layout of the newsroom or to the work flows that are established, but they also demand a "change of mentality" (Salaverría and García Avilés 2008: 39) in the different levels of journalistic production.

Juan Antonio Giner, director of Innovation International Media Consulting Group, has established the four critical points that a newsroom has to face in order to advance in multimedia integration (Giner 2008).

- Have editors who have a command of the multimedia world. "If the editor does not adapt to the multimedia challenge, you evidently need a new editor," he states.
- Create a new multimedia work flow, with live information 24 hours a day.
- Physically structure the newsroom to foster creative communication between the different areas, with open spaces and without divisions.
- Make a firm commitment to training.

At present, the most widespread forms of convergence involve collaboration between journalists from different newsrooms, the cross promotion of information content and the multimedia cover of urgent news or extraordinary events (Salaverría and García Avilés 2008: 39).

In its study into examples of integrated production in 58 Spanish media (Domingo *et al.* 2007: 15), the team of researchers came to the conclusion that the majority of newsroom convergence and integration initiatives occurred in local and regional media, basically due to the need to get the most benefit from small staff numbers in environments of convergence. By contrast, in the national media, more elaborate experiences occurred of multimedia integration and active participation of the user, given the need for significant technological developments that these media could undertake.

On the international scene, there are attractive examples of newsrooms that have started processes of integration. One of the most well-established is that of the Media General group, in which the newsrooms of the *Tampa Tribune* newspaper, the WFLA television broadcaster and the *TBO.com* digital newspaper work together. The media share the same space and the newsrooms work together, even though the content published adapt to the specific nature of each medium. The news director of WFLA, Forrest Carr, establishes seven levels of coopera-

tion between the newsrooms when explaining their experience (García Avilés 2002):

1. They share sources, subjects and ideas for future information.
2. They take better advantage of the resources in the cover of unforeseen events.
3. Most of the television camera operators take photographs for the other supports. Most of the newspaper's photographers use video cameras to capture video that can be used on television.
4. Journalists of the three newsrooms work together to produce specific subjects.
5. Various Tribune reporters collaborate in television and some of the WFLA correspondents write columns in the newspaper.
6. In major events, the cover with journalists from the three newsrooms is broader and more complete.
7. The integration of the three supports allows audience participation to be better fostered.

In Spain we have advanced experiences of integration with *La Voz de Almería* and *20 Minutos*. In the case of the Norwegian free newspaper Schibsted, integration comes about because editors produce content for both the printed and the digital edition over 24 hours.

"The central newsroom of *20 Minutos* has to be open 24 hours a day so that the editors are continuously generating content (not just information, but also entertainment, services, participation, etc.) and a management board decides at all times what should be done: whether to publish immediately on the website or on SMS, keep it for the next edition of the paper, hold on to it for a few hours, share it at the same time with the different supports, etc." (Escolar 2006)

Apart from the case of the ACN agency, which, as we have seen, has a decentralised newsroom that affords its editors a great deal of autonomy, most initiatives related to newsroom integration have two basic characteristics: on the one hand, they have a multimedia newsroom where the information flow is centralised and which tries to provide coverage of events from a multi-support perspective. And on the other, they have a coordination desk, which selects the type of cover to be provided for each event and the supports that will participate in it. In the case of *20 Minutos*, for example, the coordination desk is in the shape of a letter H, such that at the centre is the management of the newspaper, while on each side are the managers of each of the editions: the printed edition and the online edition.

### The polyvalent journalist

All of these structures require certain professional skills of the journalists to take on the challenge of working in an integrated

multimedia newsroom. These skills are brought together in what has become called the "polyvalent journalist", capable of "producing news in any medium using any necessary technological tool at any point of the process" (Domingo *et al.* 2007: 7).

In this sense, various authors agree on the need to establish two different professional profiles when speaking of polyvalent journalists (Salaverría 2003):

- *Multi-task journalist*. This refers to the professionals capable of taking on different tasks corresponding to different supports.
- *Multiplatform journalist*. This corresponds to journalists, generally specialists in one area, who use their knowledge to work in different supports, albeit always with the same subject as the central core.

Creating these polyvalent professional teams calls for intensive investment by the media in training in order to ensure the abilities and skills of the journalists when they work on different supports. These skills can be shown in three different areas (Micó 2006):

- *Media skills*. These are the ability to work in different supports, knowing the specific rules of each one.
- *Thematic skills*. Referring to the ability to tackle information from different sections.
- *Technical skills*. Understood as the necessary skills for producing information for different platforms.

The editors with the ACN referred to above are a good example of this triple polyvalence in their day-to-day work. They are polyvalent because they create content for different supports on different subjects – the specialisation of the ACN field editors is geographical and not thematic – and they have to possess the necessary technical skills to distribute the message to the agency because, as it is a decentralised newsroom based on teleworking, the editor has to be technically autonomous.

However, these transformations to the professional profile of the journalist are not entirely risk-free. There are those who see polyvalence as a business desire to cut expenses at the cost of impoverishing content (García Avilés 2002). The need to devote more resources to repackaging the information for the different supports may lead to a reduction in the number of professionals in contact with reality and information sources; professionals who, in addition, will have to devote efforts to multimedia content management.

Rintala and Suolanen (2003, quoted in Salaverría and García Avilés 2008: 42) summarise the transformations of professional profiles on the basis of research conducted in Finland:

- *Transfer of tasks*. Journalists undertake new tasks that were previously given to other professionals.
- *Fusion of roles*. Certain activities that were previously done by two or more professionals are now done by just one.
- *Increase in tasks*. The existence of multiple supports increases the tasks entrusted to the journalist, who in many cases has to adapt their professional routines to the needs of the different platforms.

To this it should be added that the professional in the traditional media has to adapt to a new communicative environment, with new ways of presenting information, new languages that integrate hypertext and audiovisual content, new requirements that make immediacy prevail in the distribution of the content and a participative audience that questions the role of the expert journalist in some areas (Sancha 2005).

This leads prestigious analyst Vin Crosbie (2008) to state that “if an editor continues to offer the same selection of content online that they offered in their printed product, there’s no convergence that will save them.” Until the appearance of the internet, the journalist was the centre of information production, they acted as gatekeeper, they controlled access to the information and they had the power of being the creator of socially accepted opinion. However, consolidation of the internet has democratised access to information and questioned the preponderance of the journalist in their social environment. The user – and not the journalist – is now at the centre of the communication process. As Dan Gilmore (2004) likes to reiterate, “journalism today is a conversation rather than a lecture”, in which professionals have to get used to being just one more speaker.

### Convergence in the company

Besides the technological, organisational and professional implications we have looked at in studying the phenomenon of media convergence, this analysis would be incomplete if we did not include a business perspective of the phenomenon, and it is true to say that newsroom integration affects the very economic model of the traditional media.

Mario Tascón, former director of Prisa, sometimes tells the story of Craig Newmark, founder of the popular Craigslist<sup>1</sup> website, who was at a dinner some years ago with leading managers and directors from the USA’s east coast newspapers. By popularising his business model, which is based on free small ads over the internet, they accused him of drastically reducing the turnover of small ads, the private preserve of the traditional press in the USA. According to the newspaper managers, Newmark had got it wrong in launching Craigslist – which only charges to post some specific advertisements – because he had destroyed a prosperous business valued at hundreds of millions of dollars. Craig Newmark’s opinion, in contrast, was very different. His website was a huge success as, despite having reduced the turnover from small ads, he now held the majority of them.

Apart from the anecdote, this passage illustrates one of the present characteristics that mark the business model in the field of the media.

- The audience of the traditional media is reduced. The increasingly more fragmented audiences are distributed between the different screens available (computer, mobile, console, television, etc.) and the traditional media such as radio and newspapers.

- New actors fight for the advertising market. The lion’s share of advertising investment continues to be with traditional business, but new internet-related media – more modest than the Craigslist example – are taking a large part of this market.

- The new advertising market on the internet is not closed in the way that it was in the traditional media. Quite the opposite in fact: the media represent a modest percentage of advertising investment on the internet. In the same way that Craigslist can take most of the small ads market, three actors account for 70% of advertising investment in Spain: Google, Yahoo and Microsoft (Tascón 2007).

In an excellent article published recently, Frédéric Filloux, director of the international division of the Schibsted group, and Jean-Louis Gassée, partner in Allegis Capital, openly explain what the profitability threshold of the media is on the internet. According to their calculations (Filloux and Gassée 2008), 8.3 million single users a month are required to cover the expenses of a quality medium on the internet with a production structure comparable to that of a traditional medium. The result is evident: low turnover media, such as digital newspapers, cannot take on the costs of creating a large newsroom. Despite the increase in advertising turnover on the internet, an exclusively online quality medium is not feasible.

This evidence has sparked the debate on media convergence in the communication environment. If revenue, albeit diminished, continues to be in the traditional media, newsroom integration becomes the only alternative for the creation of quality content on the internet. In the words of consultant Juan Varela (2008), it is only with the revenue from traditional media that the costs of a quality online publication can be financed. And this is not a one-off situation or the product of a specific moment: the calculations establish that at the same rate of fall in advertising investment in the traditional media and of growth in the digital media in Spain, the profitability threshold may be achieved in 2014 or 2015.

It has to be the traditional media – those that have been criticised because they have been unable to adapt to the communication demands of the internet – that commit to newsroom convergence to create solid communication structures on the internet, with numerous and specialist newsrooms, able to take on the challenge of creating content on the web, to exploit the multimedia possibilities, to push interaction experiments forward and to foster the role of the active audience. Only this way will we gain the time needed to mature the market and to find the business model of quality media on the internet.

In an interview pending publication (Jané 2008), Chris Anderson, editor of the prestigious *Wired* magazine, answered the question “which of the two versions of *Wired* is more successful, the paper version or the online version?” with: “In dollars, the printed version. In audience, the online version”. The challenge of the traditional media on the internet will be to know how to combine both circumstances.

### By way of conclusion

The expression “walled garden” is used on the internet to refer to a browsing environment where the information and the websites that the user can access is controlled. Some internet access providers use it to keep the user’s browsing in a specific area of their web. AOL (previously America Online) is a good example of a walled garden browsing service.

On 22 October 2008, Arthur Sulzberger, president and editor of *The New York Times*, gave a lecture as part of the Webbyconnect in California. During his speech, he used the simile of the walled garden to refer to the situation of the media before the emergence of the internet:

“The era of the walled garden is over [...] Future success on the internet is about overcoming traditional thinking.” (Sulzberger 2008.)

For years, the media have been able to manage their interests in the walled garden of their business. The emergence of digital content has ended up tearing the walls down. Newsroom convergence becomes a valid alternative so that the media begin to carve out a place in the open garden that, for them, information on the internet has become.

### Note

- 1 *Craigslist.org* is the biggest small ads website in the USA and the world. It has 25 workers and moves 9,000 million pages viewed a month. In 2007 it had a turnover of 44 million euros and it forecasts 65 million for 2008.

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