
Content convergence

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Abstract

The development and application of digital electronics within the audiovisual world, along with the incorporation of internet and the mobile telephone into the household sphere, have brought about a new composition in the systems for creating, producing, accessing, processing, storing and distributing audiovisual content with regard to both the mass media and audiences. This new situation accentuates the need for sector companies to establish a content convergence policy that covers the entire process, from the generation of content to its presentation to the public.

Key words

Content convergence, production systems, content management, access, storing, interactivity, Internet, DTT, publishing, production tools.

Resum

El desenvolupament i l'aplicació de l'electrònica digital dins el món audiovisual, juntament amb l'introducció d'internet i de la telefonia mòbil al món domèstic ha propiciat una nova configuració del sistema de creació, producció, accés, gestió, arxiu i difusió de continguts audiovisuals tant pel que fa als mitjans de comunicació com a l'audiència. Aquest nou context accentua la necessitat que les empreses del sector estableixin una política de convergència de continguts que abasti tot el procés, des de la generació de continguts fins a la seva presentació al públic.

Paraules clau

Convergència de continguts, sistemes de producció, gestió de continguts, accés, arxiu, interactivitat, internet, TDT, publicació, eines de producció.

Introduction

Since their creation and up to very recently, the production systems used to create content for radio (sound, voice, music), television (image, sound, graphics) and other media have been separate. The recording tools and the tools used by professionals, the working systems, technologies and supports from the archives and other sources and the elements used by the audience to access them all went to make up clearly differentiated and non-connectable worlds. In this environment, any possible transfer of information or content was one-off: very often it was related to interpersonal issues rather than structured flows of work and materials.

As from the first half of the 1990s, with the development and application of digital electronics in the audiovisual world, a significant part of the "format" barriers disappeared. At the same time, this presence of digital technology was also noticed in the domestic world and the world of the internet and mobile telephony appeared.

These changes have occurred and are still occurring with extraordinary speed. At the end of the 1990s, some key actions appeared proposing paradigmatic changes in the world

of production (multimedia journalism) and there were prophecies of "cataclysms" and the "disappearance" of traditional media. After some time, a part of these forecasts has been modified, as well as the financial speculations made about them.

Now that this absorbing wave has passed and the waters have abated, a new context has appeared that sets out and delimits possibilities, tools, processes and modes of access to content, both for professionals and for the audience.

Concept

This context clearly shows the need to implement a policy of content convergence within firms in the industry, a policy that includes the whole value chain: the generation of content, its processing and storing and presentation to the public. It also includes, as an innovative element, the possibility to actively involve the public. However, this policy must be applied very carefully, as each medium has its own particularities and the whole approach with regard to creativity and language is fundamental.

Content convergence and production infrastructures

The first point where this principle should be applied is located within what we might call “production infrastructures”. Included under this concept is the series of tools that allow industry professionals to access content, produce new content, share it with colleagues and coordinate with them when producing the final product.

Online access

Online access to content is the basic element in the whole of production tools. Nowadays, this access means placing at the disposal of professionals all the content that “circulates” around the company. This must consist both of up-to-the-minute content as well as from the archives. It also means ease of sharing content with other team members and the possibility of coordinating with them. In the case of the Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals, this is equivalent to the access of professionals working on television and radio and also multimedia editors.

Such access also entails the possibility of easily accessing online other content that is outside the company, that might come from production houses, advertising agencies, dubbing agencies or other corporations, just to give a few examples. In this case, in addition to the tools required for this access, it is worth noting that there must also be policies of alliances and acquisitions to enable this online access to content outside the company itself with other organisations in the industry.

Search tools

One of the basic elements of modern production infrastructures is being able to have, internally within the same company, powerful search tools that offer the possibility to get, quickly and “easily”, all the content a radio, television or multimedia professional needs to do their work.

In this case I would like to point out the prime importance of access being easy and fast. This can be seen if we just imagine a situation where, as is very habitual, a short time before the news or bulletin is to be broadcast, a news item “breaks” that requires access to archive material, be it contemporary or from 40 years ago, to explain the item to the audience or even to illustrate it with images.

Under this concept we also include the range of facilities provided to professionals so that they can allocate as much time possible to improving product quality instead of spending quite so much time on tasks of little added value (such as transferring tapes or looking for material that ultimately can't be found).

At the same time as tackling these search issues, it is also very important for search tools to be common to the whole organisation, both for television and radio professionals and

also those from other multimedia sections of the company. It's also good for them to be common for the different departments that go to make up each traditional medium: news, sports, programmes, etc.

Tools for managing and creating content

At present, professionals from each of the professional media (radio, television, internet) have a series of specific network-based tools to manage and create content.

The first area with such tools within the audiovisual sector was radio. At the beginning of the 1990s, a series of tools appeared on the market that allowed radio professionals, journalists and creatives to access online, from their workplace, the content and materials required to do their job. They could also share these materials with their colleagues and work on them until the whole production was complete, practically independently.

Later on, at the end of the decade, television also started to provide its professionals with this facility. Afterwards the areas of internet and multimedia in general followed.

The solutions available on the market for radio, television or the internet were developed by different specialist firms in each industry. Apart from the odd exception, the aim was not common systems for the three media designed by companies that wished to take advantage of synergies or attempting to make products that served across the board.

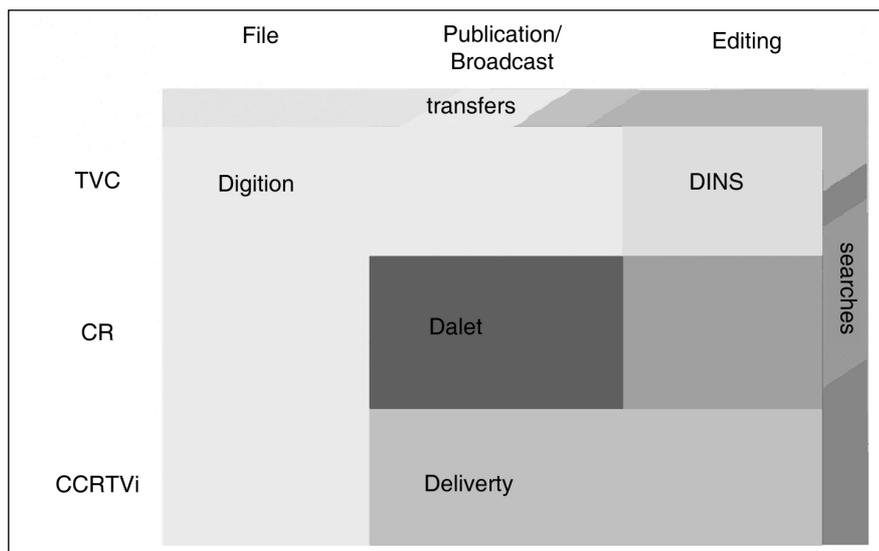
In this case, content convergence means a new generation of this kind of platform. In the first phase it is important to work with the same tool from each medium. At the beginning this could actually lead to a loss of the minute “adjustment” that each platform has assimilated in order to produce its products. The concept would lean more towards being interconnected, so that radio, television and internet professionals could share news items, archive material and content that is being produced. The aim would be to also share tools for communication, production management, searches and, in general, access to the information that most directly affects their work.

In diagram 1 we can see that Televisió de Catalunya, Catalunya Ràdio and CCRTV Interactiva:

- Share archive and content management tools (Digition).
- Have tools dedicated to content production, specific for each medium: Digition for TV3, Dalet for Catalunya Ràdio and Delivery for CCRTV Interactiva.
- The possibility is being looked at of creating an editing/coordination program (DINS) to ensure that the professionals from the three firms are well coordinated.

Sharing content between media

Sharing content between media is therefore the other professional face of content convergence.

Diagram 1. Structure of content management and creation tools

Source: own.

The different professionals who produce products for audiences (TV viewers, listeners and internet users) should have at their disposal, at all times and in a simple, structured way, the whole audiovisual content of a multi-platform group.

This “whole” is meant in the broad sense. Both a radio journalist and a TV producer, a website or mobile content editor must all be able to access the whole of the organisation’s material. Moreover, this source material usually has complex issues of rights related to the content.

Generalised access includes both contemporary items and archive material and, in some cases, online access to sources belonging to external organisations, which have granted the right to their material.

Access means also being able to search and download content from your usual workplace.

Projects across the board

Once an audiovisual corporation has the technical facilities we have described, work can start on carrying out audiovisual projects across the board, i.e. involving more than one medium.

This facet can give rise to interesting projects in the field of news when multi-support coverage is required for events or for structured coverage with public involvement.

This ‘across the board’ aspect can also be employed to produce high quality products that are benchmarks in their area. For example, productions such as *Guernica, pintura de guerra*, made at TV3. The interactive services of this production, developed by CCRTV Interactiva and TV3, broadened the viewer’s TV experience beyond the documentary. Through the website, digital terrestrial television (DTT) and Windows Media

Center, viewers discovered the story of the painting and how it had travelled around the world. Access was also provided to the biographies of people related to *Guernica*, as well as providing different analyses of the painting. Moreover, people could also take part in quiz linked to the information in the report and interactive content.

This product was of extraordinarily high quality, a leading trendsetter and prime example of content convergence, which was awarded the Grand Prix Internacional from URTI (Universitat Internacional de Ràdio i Televisió) and the International Interactive TV Awards of 2007.

With regard to the area of entertainment, for some time now the audiovisual industry has been moving along these lines. Although the socially successful experiences that have been carried out to date have been very much focused on financial returns, it should be noted that they have led to a high level of audience participation, with the public identifying with the product. Examples of this kind of phenomenon would be the different “people’s votes” within programmes such as *Fama iA bailar!* or *Operación Triunfo*.

The archive and access to online content

The current technological environment and the series of tools available to our professionals mean that the concepts we have had to date of archive, access and online content are changing.

Conceptually, there are four key changes: effective access at any time, without restrictions (except those regarding copyright or authorisation), from different places and with the freedom to work on the content right from the start.

The objective of corporations such as our own must be to ensure that access by their professionals to their audiovisual

archives is the same as the access everyone has via internet search engines (Google, YouTube), in other words, 24/7 to all the indexed material, from different locations and with the possibility to download and work on content at any time.

If we reflect a little, we can observe that factors that were hitherto critical have lost importance:

- Physical location of the content and location in more than one place.
- Formats in which the original documents are stored.
- Age of the originals.

And, on the other hand, relatively new concepts have become important:

- Continuous, reliable, robust service.
- Secure access.
- Good metadata and good search facilities.
- Adaptation to new tools to update the system.

At the archive of the Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (CCMA), where more than 60,000 hours of audiovisual content have been digitised and are accessible, what is important is authorisation for free access, the search tools to find the material and the working tools to produce new content based on these materials.

In fact, an authorised professional from any workplace within the CCMA, including the branches in different locations in Catalonia and Spain, and irrespective of the medium (television, radio or multimedia), has all these facilities and tools to work on content, which might be from that very day or from 15 years ago, and to leave behind a finished piece.

Publication on different media

The application of this content convergence concept in the area of dissemination translates into the facility to get the content to the audience in the format or language the viewer or listener wants at any particular time.

A benchmark of what we are highlighting here is citizen information. Throughout the day, citizens access information via different media: radio when they get up, television in the kitchen while they have breakfast, text messages to their mobiles... Once in the car, again the radio and, at work and during the working day, they access information via the internet. When they go home, once again via the car radio and, at home, via the television and internet.

The approach of a corporation such as our own or any information service of a corporation includes getting news to the viewer, listener or user in the format they need, at the time they need it. What is required is an approach that is not so separated along the different media, as independent items, but global and coordinated between the media.

It's important to remember that a view of the whole range of what the receiver can be offered needs to be adopted, not only

via each medium separately. We must bear in mind that each medium (television, radio, internet, mobile information, interactive applications...) does not have the same audiovisual possibilities nor the same kind of language nor the same way of reaching the receiver. It is therefore essential to keep the media perfectly coordinated, at the same time as respecting each medium's format and language.

This desire to respect formats and languages is, per se, complex and is even more so when new technologies increasingly include the value of asynchronicity. On the radio there is the possibility of accessing content via podcasting and, on television, this is also possible thanks to IP services and registration systems. Using these new technological features, the audience can access the same programme in different ways based on registering and can even go from one part or to different parts of this content in a structured way.

Production/publication tools

As we have explained in the previous paragraphs, much care must be taken in adapting content to each medium. We must not fall into the trap of thinking that the same tool can be used for content convergence in all media. In the future this might be possible but, at the moment and in the short-term, probably not.

Each medium has a language and particularities that make it special and the professionals working in this medium need tools that are perfectly adapted to these specifics. In this respect, the tools must not only be adapted for the work of each professional but rather so that the coordination of working groups in a corporation can depend on these tools.

Radio professionals need different tools to those employed by television professionals or those used by an editor of an internet portal.

In this case, for us, media convergence does not equal a "unification" of this kind of tool but rather the possibility to interconnect, facilitating the creation of a network and collaboration between media.

Introducing audience participation

One point that should be valued and taken increasingly into account is that of audience participation. This is a broad, professional concept of participation that must be incorporated within the organisation, considering the possibilities offered now and in the future. Participation is a growing asset that must be valued as another tool, albeit remaining realistic and within the range of possibility.

When designing our infrastructure and equipment, and when thinking about disseminating and publishing our content, we believe it is fundamental to bear in mind the need to have a series of totally professional tools and processes so that these

possibilities can be used and taken advantage of.

Our audience has increasingly more powerful cameras, microphones, audiovisual production and graphic design tools in their homes and can connect to a network with us. It is therefore evident that we need to integrate the audience within our production structures.

A good example of this is the initiative carried out by the British channel, Channel Four, which has implemented an ambitious plan to involve the public.

Via its website, Channel Four has proposed "training" for possible collaborators, for anyone interested in producing an audiovisual product. Entitled FourDocs, it teaches viewers the rudiments of documentaries, gives instructions regarding format and duration and shows the most relevant products on the television channel. If broadcast, the person or team that has made the product is also paid.

FourDocs is really a good example of convergence and a benchmark of what can be done today with a mixture of television, internet and audience participation. Moreover, the quality of the final product is by no means slight.

CTT, interactivity and media convergence

Before concluding, I would like to particularly mention DTT and interactivity. I would like to point out that DTT constitutes an advance in the transformation of audiovisual content towards our audience. It is in no way an end but rather a step forward; one more step both in terms of how content is "served" to the public and the chance for the public to interact with it.

Some years ago, the arrival of teletext meant that, in addition to the TV signal, we could also distribute information and complementary services to programming, among other content.

The rollout of DTT has presented new tools and new possibilities in carrying out this complementary task and has opened up a return channel.

The fact that it has not developed to the extent predicted by some experts does not mean, in any case, that the possibilities are insignificant and that we should necessarily turn our backs on it. The chance to improve the image and sound and the new possibilities of access are things that must reinforce the idea that we are currently undergoing a new phase and have not yet finished the race.

We should hope that, with the possibility of connection via DTT and IP, together with the increase in bandwidth available for homes, the new devices will notably extend the range of products of this type available to us.

In this case I would like to point out the R&D projects carried out at CCMA and funded as part of the research plans of the European Union, such as T-Govern, relating citizens and public administration, and the ARENA project, measuring digital TV audiences.

So we should not turn our backs on DTT or the interaction

that can result from it, but must appropriately follow its evolution and be prepared in case new opportunities for broadcasters arise within the next few years.

Perspectives and strategy

Content convergence goes beyond a simple technological change and ultimately involves a change in philosophy in all spheres.

From the audience point of view, we can see that a relevant (and growing) proportion of the public following our programmes and content can be permanently connected to us. They connect throughout the day, switching between television, radio, internet and mobile phone.

This is a relatively new situation that is also evolving. Our audience, be they viewers, listeners or internet users, have increasingly more facilities, better and more portable equipment with more capacity and features. They also have better and more economical networks, with more capacity.

The other particularly relevant change regarding audience is the possibility to take part in the content. This participation goes beyond choosing in a vote or a game and starts to penetrate the area of creation or contribution of quality content on the part of the public. As in the above case, it is a situation in its initial stages and it is growing (users with better equipment, production tools and capacity to send information generated at home to the media).

With regard to media professionals, the situation is also new and open to evolution. For now, these professionals have access to online content which they can share with other colleagues and they also have good publication tools and access to archives. We can now think of creating across the board products that go beyond those of radio, television or multimedia and think of new possibilities for content for our audience. Clear examples of this are programmes aimed at children, news programmes, sports news, entertainment and a long etcetera.

In any case, we must be very prudent. In my opinion, the basis of everything is the product and not the platforms. The product, which might be simply for television or radio, is what must call the shots, while the platforms must offer the possibility to distribute it or open it up to new lines. Platforms per se, in my opinion, do not catch attention: the hook is the product.

It is therefore evident that the current situation is an invitation for reflection, both in terms of the audiovisual media and also in terms of our group. As from now we can experiment with and, as we have mentioned, think of carrying out new initiatives in the field of news (e.g. transforming the concept of "doing news" to "keeping the audience informed") and children's programmes (taking characters beyond television, to the internet, to games...) and even open up other lines in the area of participation.

We therefore need to advance together, experimenting with

these initiatives and getting to know them.

Although finding the perfect solution is difficult (if there such a thing as the perfect solution), what is true is that we cannot turn our backs on convergence, not from the point of view of production nor from that of distribution. We therefore have to change or experiment with the focus.

We believe that, without forgetting excellent professional caution, now is the time to be brave.