

The economic impact of digitalisation and convergence in Spain's audiovisual sector

JUAN PABLO ARTERO

Lecturer at the Faculty of Communication of the Universidad de Navarra

jpartero@unav.es

ALFONSO SÁNCHEZ-TABERNEO

Lecturer at the Faculty of Communication of the Universidad de Navarra

astabernero@unav.es

MÓNICA HERRERO

Lecturer at the Faculty of Communication of the Universidad de Navarra

moherrero@unav.es

Abstract

In this article, we will analyse the effects of digitalisation and convergence, both in the world of television and in the evolution of business models for firms in this sector. We will also refer to the convergence of business and technology in new intermediaries in the audiovisual market. Later on we will describe the public's increasingly important role and, finally, we will examine the possible scenarios for Spain's audiovisual sector in the second decade of this century.

Key words

Television, digitalisation, audiovisual, convergence, firm, audience, Spain.

Resum

En aquest article analitzarem els efectes de la digitalització i la convergència en l'oferta televisiva i en l'evolució dels models de negoci de les empreses del sector; també farem referència a la convergència empresarial i tecnològica dels nous intermediaris del mercat audiovisual; més tard descriurem el protagonisme creixent que està assumint el públic, i finalment suggerirem els escenaris possibles del sector audiovisual a Espanya en la segona dècada d'aquest segle.

Paraules clau

Televisió, digitalització, audiovisual, convergència, empresa, audiència, Espanya.

Spain's first taste of television came on 10 June 1948, during a technological exhibition at Barcelona's international trade fair. From this point on, developments continued until, on 28 October 1956, TVE inaugurated its daily television schedule. For half a century, the number of available channels grew slowly. From 1983, the public monopoly became a duopoly in some autonomous markets; in 1990 the transition to an oligopoly occurred, with the appearance of first three private channels. From the start of the 21st century, the market has enjoyed greater competition, at least for viewers with access to digital channels (García Matilla and Aranaz 2008; Prado [et al.] 2008).

An important milestone in the history of Spanish television was reached on 3 April 2010: the switchover to digital television. This brought about three fundamental changes: it improved screen quality, it encouraged the appearance of new value-added services, and it universalised the multi-channel home. On this date, television finished its journey from a system of offering channels to a supply and demand culture, with the public playing a decisive role.

Until now, the television market has formed the basis of the audiovisual sector; you only have to consider that the public spends an average of 226 minutes a day watching television

(TNS 2010), while the traditional alternative, the cinema, has much lower numbers: Spaniards only go to the cinema three times a year. New platforms have sprung up everywhere in recent years, above all computers and mobile telephones, which vie with television for the public's preferred way of viewing audiovisual products.

In this article, we will analyse the effects of digitalisation and convergence, both in the world of television and in the evolution of business models for firms in this sector. We will also refer to the convergence of business and technology in new intermediaries in the audiovisual market. Later on we will describe the public's increasingly important role and, finally, we will examine the possible scenarios for Spain's audiovisual sector in the second decade of this century.

A fragmented market

At the end of 1990, RTVE (through TVE-1 and TVE-2) monopolised 72% of audiences. Nineteen years later, Telecinco became the market leader, with a share of only 15.1%. The situation in 1990, with just a few analogue channels available

only via national terrestrial television, changed two decades later into a mosaic of highly diverse possibilities, driven by the transition from analogue to digital technology. Nowadays audiences enjoy channels with very different content (both general and thematic), geographical range (international, national, regional and local), distribution (terrestrial, cable, satellite and ADSL), ownership (public and private) and financing (public, subsidised and subscription).

The increase in competition has forced television companies to redefine their role because they now cannot “sell” mass audiences to advertisers (Gabszewicz [et al.] 2004). Consequently, they can neither obtain sufficient earnings to finance the payroll of thousands of employees nor pay for costly rights to cover sporting events and drama. The change in competition has been seen mainly in four aspects: the repositioning of each brand; a reduction in running costs; a search for alternative forms of funding to conventional advertising; and the start of the first steps towards concentration.

The brands’ new position has been driven by the appearance of channels with very varied market niches, taking audiences away from more general channels. Theme-based and local channels, which achieved a joint share of 4.8% of the Spanish market in 2002, increased their audiences to 20.6% at the end of 2009 (TNS 2010). Every fraction won by a themed channel represents a small loss for a general channel, until “channels for everyone” are in danger of becoming “channels for no one”.

As is the case with any market that sees a transition from scarcity to abundance, operators have been forced to reduce their focus, to choose a more delineated public. Strategic content-driven approaches can be based on ideological, demographic profiles, or on interests and preferences. Brands differentiate themselves and accentuate their identity (Park 2005; Hollifield 2006): they move from interesting the many a little to interesting the few a lot. Obviously, the transition has not happened dramatically and some channels still have programming that is aimed at a large number of viewers.

The reduction in running costs happens partly because of market fragmentation; boards of directors adjust their programming budgets to expected revenue: with audience ratings of less than 9% (which is the case with all private channels except Telecinco and Antena 3 TV) they cannot pay copyright holders or cinema and television producers the going rate from the era of oligopoly. In recent years, many contracts have been renegotiated and the extraordinary levels of inflation between 1990 and 2007 have ended, and seemingly for good.

Increases in efficiency thanks to new technology also help to control expenditure: digital technology brings reductions in production costs, management and distribution of content and boosts human productivity. Consequently, there are already some operators with market shares of less than 2% who nonetheless make a profit.

For these first success stories to become consolidated, television companies must find new alternative sources of funding other than conventional advertising. This need is due as much

to structural difficulties (audience fragmentation) as it is to difficulties with the current situation (advertising crises). On the one hand, the advertising “pie” is shared between more and more companies; on the other, television advertising has fallen by more than 31% in two years, from 3,470 million euros in 2007 to 2,380 million in 2009 (InfoAdex 2010).

Although the advertising sector is expected to recover in the next few months, television is losing its hegemony in advertising markets. In Spain it still controls 42% of total media expenditure but, significantly, in Great Britain the internet became the top choice for advertisers after half a century of television dominance.

The end of advertising on RTVE, effective since the beginning of 2010, has “liberated” 500 million euros and provides a lifeline for private operators. Autonomous channels are also likely to limit – and in some cases get rid of – advertising time. But these decisions will not be enough for many private channels to survive if they don’t find new sources of income, such as selling their content, interactive services or subscriber content for mobile phones and the internet.

Mergers and acquisitions are also an indirect consequence of digitalisation: the appearance of new channels has caused a noticeable slump in average profitability for the sector. Under such circumstances, managers always react in the same way: they try to concentrate businesses in order to reduce costs and recuperate any losses. Telecinco and Cuatro on the one hand, and Antena 3 TV and laSexta on the other, could become the two largest audiovisual groups in the Spanish market. If these mergers happen, the audiovisual landscape would be similar to those in our nearest neighbouring countries, in which two or three large audiovisual firms control a high joint audience share together for private channels.

With the current “merger fever”, which will affect small operators in the future, the large private companies (Antena 3 TV and Telecinco) are confident of recuperating part of their lost profitability, while the owners of more recent and smaller channels (Prisa and Mediapro) hope to resolve their excessive levels of debt. These activities are possible because, in 2009, the government modified the legislation governing concentration in the industry: it’s now legal for one shareholder to own various channels as long as its total audience does not exceed 27% of the market (Act 7/2009).

Media ownership concentration in the Spanish audiovisual market will have various consequences. First, the public will become aware of collaborative advertising agreements between channels that belong to the same company. However, the owners aim to respect the identity of each brand, and its viewers, at least initially, will not perceive a reduction in quality or in the variety of what is on offer. Second, television companies will offer more varied deals and packages to advertisers, possibly by broadcasting the same commercials simultaneously on various platforms. However, the perennial problem these companies will face is culture shock, aggravated by the different editorial profile of the merging channels.

Third, and finally, producers and copyright holders will have fewer buyers but these will be more solid, both economically and financially. They will therefore ease the current situation of price cuts and, in particular, the alarming delay in payments, which causes huge cash flow problems for content providers (Fernández-Quijada 2009). The increase in broadcasting hours will not be accompanied by a similar growth in production hours: the growth in audiovisual groups that own various channels, and the pressure for good economic results, will encourage channels to repeat entertainment and drama programmes.

If concentrated media ownership becomes consolidated, the main risks for the new market will come from the possible abuse of power by major players: their privileged position with content providers and advertising companies can make survival difficult for smaller organisations. If regulators are not vigilant, a return to the age of oligopoly will mean that imitation strategies reign supreme, pacts are made to share out the market and the current abundance of channels will become a landscape of only apparent variety

The new intermediaries

As well as media directed at “end users”, some firms will act as intermediaries in audiovisual markets. The concept of the “intermediary” in terms of content is a useful tool for describing and analysing both the present and the future of markets (Hess and von Walter 2006). For example, Google aspires to organise information worldwide: it doesn't create content but makes it visible and available to audiences. Google's intermediary role has generated suspicion in the audiovisual sector because it could lead to an abuse of power.

Content available through Google is usually a *commodity*, in a market where the capacity to offer premium content is increasingly more decisive, as illustrated by those firms that have cemented their growth in exclusive sporting rights: BSkyB (UK), Canal Plus (France and Spain, amongst others), Foxtel (Australia) and DirecTV (North and South America).

Strict European regulation applicable to commercial channels has decreased their ability to make a profit from advertising when showing sports events and films. In fact, the legal framework has favoured the development of pay television and, to increase their capacity to attract investment, these channels have dedicated many resources to acquiring content that is particularly appealing to audiences. However, competition with rival companies can make these acquisitions unprofitable: in Europe, this phenomenon particularly affects football leagues.

Pay channels are increasingly finding themselves at a crossroads: they have to spend excessive amounts of money in their programming or they won't achieve sufficient numbers of subscribers. Internal investigations at British company BSkyB revealed that, years ago, it would lose half its subscribers if it

stopped offering Premier League games (Hammervold and Solberg 2006). Moreover, in addition to inflated sport broadcasting rights, there is also a legal issue: controlling bodies are usually opposed to long-duration contracts between channels and rights holders because they think that it's good for the public if the market remains open to new operators.

On the other hand, digitalisation and the development of new consumer devices have made it more difficult for those in the communication market to protect content copyright. The most common ways of breaking the law include music and film pirate copies and illegal sales, exchanging files peer-to-peer, piracy of pay television signals, access to subscription websites by false passwords, distribution of protected audiovisual content by video portals, and plagiarising newspaper content on the internet. The spread and diversity of international law in this field does not help to effectively clamp down on digital crime (Artero 2009).

The television syndication industry, which has a long tradition in the United States, is currently undergoing a notable transformation. The increase in the number of channels, which is much greater than the growth in audiovisual production, favours the development of syndicated programming and programme repeats and adaptations. Consolidating television on the internet and broadband could add new distribution methods for this market (Oba and Chan-Olmsted 2006).

Changes in the management of exclusive content have as much an impact on pay channels as on public television. When considering the industry alongside diverse sources of content, distribution and devices, four main business models can be identified (Berman, Abraham, Battino, Shipnuck and Neus 2007):

Traditional media. The core idea of this system is brand content (created by professionals) distributed through conditional access settings and specific devices. Nowadays most communication companies operate according to this model.

Closed communities. These are based on the distribution of content generated by users within a wall or environment with conditional access and via specific devices. Typically these are traditional businesses that allow contributions from users. For example, NTT DoCoMO has some 95,000 communities which access its service through their devices. And Comcast has just announced an agreement with Facebook to produce a television series with user-generated videos.

Hypersyndication of content. This is about making professional content accessible on open channels, without specific devices or access suppliers. Examples include American channels that offer content through their own websites and communal projects such as Hulu.

Aggregation of platforms. This more extreme model is based both on user-generated content as well as on open distribution platforms. It's the most disruptive model, since neither the traditional producers nor distributors hold any advantages. In this case, it's obvious that aggregators are guided above all by users, such as with YouTube, MySpace or Second Life.

In the next few years, a clear winner is unlikely to emerge from these four business models. In fact, all that can be hoped for is that the different companies opt for different models and unique combinations that play to their strengths and traditional assets. As a result, the market landscape will be extremely varied and even chaotic.

Whatever happens, the internet will increasingly become an important platform for distributing videos to users. It's also hoped that video will capture a growing portion of internet traffic. This offers opportunities for new content providers and online distributors to efficiently reach a wide audience but it also presents challenges for traditional producers and distributors. These companies are losing control over what users see and when and how they see it, including their own protected content. The clash between opportunities and challenges for internet video production and distribution can also be seen in the legal aspects. The intersection between the growth of broadband and innovative methods of creating and distributing online video will continue presenting new challenges for production and distribution business models (Meisel 2009).

With an average of three and a half hours of daily viewing, the big players of the audiovisual world seem relatively unbothered by user-generated content on the internet. Producers do not think this phenomenon will bring about the emergence of a community-based model of content distribution but rather another path towards piracy. However, the question is whether this model can be ignored, taking into account the fact that the public creates and distributes its own programmes with extraordinary ease (Mabillot 2007).

Sites that distribute videos on the internet have moved from occupying a marginal space on the sidelines to a central position in the media landscape. Available videos often include a mixture of content generated both by users and professionals, and channels fear that the availability of content on the internet will depreciate television consumption. Before the growth of more or less independent video sites, such as YouTube, channels responded by offering their content on their own sites or on groups, such as Hulu.

The effects of internet distribution have been noticed on the patterns of traditional television consumption, especially among the younger population. Although there is evidence that traditional ways of watching programmes have been replaced by internet use, the time invested in watching programmes on the web vastly exceeds the minimal reduction in traditional viewing. In any case, time invested grows when conventional television can be seen on the channels' websites (Waldfoegel 2009). Both platforms – television and web – can offer free proposals for users, unlike operators who charge, such as Amazon, iTunes, Netflix or TV Everywhere.

Most of the new business models in this sector have not been very profitable to date. Technological advances (in most cases, broadband currently does not allow for optimum viewing), changes in consumer habits (mainly migration towards the internet by younger audiences) and uncertainty about piracy

justify attempts to find new strategic possibilities in the audiovisual industry.

It's still impossible to judge whether new consumer windows – the internet, mobile phones, video consoles or any other method – will end up either dominated by traditional operators (the large communication groups) or controlled by new intermediaries. The former have gained a dominant position in content production thanks to their competitive distribution advantages. New intermediaries, on the other hand, are attempting to position themselves in other functions on the value chain to capture part of the revenue. In this competitive environment, audiovisual firms that have been dominant until now have resisted entering into distribution networks with new operators for fear of weakening the entrance barriers.

New audiovisual intermediaries are trying to get as much revenue as possible from the new value chain. In this battle, in-between traditional audiovisual firms and consumers are telecommunications operators such as Telefónica or Verizon; information technology firms such as Microsoft or Apple; internet companies such as Google and Yahoo; and the consumer electronics manufacturers, from Sony to Nokia.

Within this scenario, audiovisual firms act as the fifth fundamental player. Historically they've been the most important player but it's difficult to predict what their strategic position will be when new business practices, technological developments and consumer habits are consolidated. The moment of truth will come when internet users in developed countries get closer to one hundred per cent penetration, not just based on the younger populations, which do not coincide with the greatest purchasing power. Also by then technology will have generated disruptive innovations whose effects are difficult to predict in the long term.

Communication companies are redefining their role, both in society and in their own core business. They often see themselves as audience sellers and content providers more than as technology firms. Their research and development is heavily outsourced to external technological and information technology providers. Their biggest threats come from legal and regulatory aspects (including copyright), technological uncertainty, audience fragmentation and from some restrictive practices by the competition. The most innovative firms suffered a tough reversal in fortune when the technological bubble burst but their leaders know that their future requires them to embrace and completely integrate digital strategies (Dennis, Warley and Sheridan 2006).

The public's role

When redefining themselves, communication firms must consider the special role that users play, as these have gradually become more active not only in consuming but also in configuring and creating their own audiovisual content.

Direct payment for audiovisual content marked the start of a

relationship with the audiovisual medium in which television subscribers could show their preferences. In this first stage, taking out or cancelling a subscription to a channel (“churning”) were the only ways in which they could show their satisfaction. A channel’s fundamental strategy centred on gaining their subscribers’ loyalty and finding out what caused people to cancel. With the development of multi-channel offers, when digital television became integrated into cable and satellite, subscribers could choose their own packages of channels, according to any given offer. This freedom for users to show their preferences grew. The development of pay-per-view systems allows users to indicate their preferences for individual content, and also introduces flexibility in when the content is consumed (Herrero 2003).

Pay platforms for cable and satellite were the first to introduce more flexibility into their television schedules, offering multiplex channels on which repeats from the main channel are broadcast. Afterwards, they incorporated the possibility of pay-per-view films and sporting events. The second step, known as “video on demand”, increased users’ opportunities to access content whenever they wished.

In pay television, the idea of flexible consuming at the user’s demand really took shape with digital video recorders. Digital video recorders record lineal content on a hard disk, which allows users to enjoy it whenever and however they choose. Users choose what they want to record through an electronic programme guide in a way that introduces and stores their preferences; the DVR also can make recommendations.

The leader in the market is TiVO, which has managed to identify the activity of the digital video recorder with its brand. Together with Carlson, the DVR clashed with three established practices in the television business. First, the flow of content on traditional schedules; second, the idea that television viewers watch adverts that are broadcast between programmes; and third, the need to measure audience numbers to establish ratings and set prices for advertisers (Carlson 2006). However, central to the DVR’s concept is *timeshifting*, where the viewer can avoid advertising.

The potential for personalisation allowed by TiVO leads to the paradox mentioned by Carlson. While users apparently control what they want to watch without any advertising, the DVR will increasingly allow companies to process audience facts, such as demographics and television preferences, which are worth a lot to both content providers and advertisers. Users therefore gain control over programming but television channels and advertisers can control individual information and, therefore, target advertising.

With the development of mobile media for enjoying audiovisual content, users not only enjoy flexibility in terms of when they listen to or watch something but also where they do so. With mobile phones and iPods and other portable methods that allow multimedia downloads, the differential advantage over other methods lies in what is called *placeshifting*, or overcoming barriers of space to access content. Overcoming time

and space limits can therefore be summed up in the concepts of *placeshifting* and *timeshifting*, possible thanks to the development of media that allow increasingly more personalised audiovisual offers (Steinbock 2005).

This evolution clearly demonstrates that audiovisual content is moving away from being viewed as only for mass consumption, as was the case at the beginning. The very nature of the medium, and the financing behind the activity encouraged this belief. However, the personalisation of consumer methods (time and place) and the possibilities of showing preferences have led to a new generation of audiovisual content that offers more possibilities for satisfying the needs of individual users, as well as giving them a major role.

Developments in how audiovisual content is distributed on the internet have brought about an enhanced role for users, who now not only choose what they want to see (and when and where) but who can also create and distribute content. In fact, the barriers of time and space are broken via the internet but users also acquire a more important role. Over the last few years, an interesting process has also been developing: from the spreading of audiovisual content from the programming grid to the internet, we are now evolving towards the creation of content on the internet by users that then goes onto the small screen. Successful examples of this already exist, showing how the internet has become a breeding ground for potential talent for channels, with interesting new stories and unknown talent becoming known through video blogs.

As a method of distribution, the internet is an extremely flexible network of networks. Moreover, it’s not restricted to certain geographical territories and its very structure makes it universal and accessible from anywhere. Legal barriers (range of distribution, concessions, etc.) and geographical barriers are non-existent; only language presents difficulties for content travelling equally to any place in the world.

The first forms of User Generated Content (UGC) date back to the beginning of the 1980s with *Usenet*, a global discussion network, which enabled users to share comments and experiences on a given topic. At the end of the 1990s, “ratings sites” were created: users ranked themes or matters according to a number of criteria, from physical appearance to professional competence. Finally, discussion forums were another early form, allowing users to communicate with each other on different themes. UGC was all about primordial forms of participation, which favoured a certain configuration of content and made use of the internet’s own interactivity.

However, with the evolution of Web 2.0 a more demanding concept was developed of what is now understood as user-generated content. As a concept, users can be defined by three main elements (OECD 2007). First, user-generated content can be published without restrictions or barriers, but it is not done for interpersonal communication, like email. Second, it requires a certain creative effort: good for drawing up new content or adapting already existing content. Finally, the creation of this content remains outside professional practices and routines.

Types of UGC include blogs, wikis, podcasting and social networks.

User-generated content is also called consumer-generated media (CGM). This definition widens the generic consideration of content to that of the media, with its more integrating function as a communication market agent (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2008). UGC has specific characteristics, some of which can be applied especially to audiovisual content. First, the content gives rise to a strong feeling of ownership of the medium. It allows relationships between common cultural interests and also facilitates social integration. The result is the recognition and development of amateur creators, who are then discovered by agencies, producers, internet sites and communication firms (OECD 2007: 36).

UGC blurs the boundaries between editor and user, with the resulting problems of authorship and attribution. Consequently, this has given rise to content piracy, minimising the perception of illegality and crime. On the other hand, content is frequently of low quality, although sometimes it can be considered a hotbed of talent.

The accessibility of the internet, low production costs and zero marginal costs mean that it has become a convenient platform for distributing homemade audiovisual content. The internet's very nature makes creative endeavours possible with few barriers. Before the arrival of the internet, for audiovisual products to be produced and accessed by an audience it was necessary to go through a large number of competitive processes which often, sometimes for commercial reasons, stopped them from coming to light. However, many of these processes act as quality controls. In the absence of obstacles to creativity, a lot of user-generated content aims specifically to rebel, be irreverent or erotic: aspects that would make it difficult to broadcast on television channels and that, to a certain extent, is the result of a desire to make a claim, to integrate socially, etc. A lot of this content is not artistically or technically of high quality.

Some producers have already made the leap from internet to television. One of the first successful cases was *Qué vida más triste* (What a sad life). This programme, broadcast on laSexta, originated in a video blog created by Rubén Ontiveros, scriptwriter for the ETB programme *Vaya semanita* (What a week), who started recording small homemade pieces for the internet. With hardly any budget, Ontiveros wrote the scripts, recorded the videos and posted them on *YouTube*. The programmes were a kind of personal blog where he humorously recorded how his week had been, his problems, relationships with friends, etc. The series' first online phase attracted 50,000 visits a week. The producer K2000 decided to give this video blog a television format on laSexta.

Digitalization and the development of the internet as a platform for audiovisual content have brought about a changing role for users, ranging from the flexibility of when they watch or listen to something (overcoming barriers of time and space) to the creation of new content, hotbeds of talent for audiovisual firms.

From the point of view of both the industry and the market, companies must prepare themselves in order to compete in a setting characterised by versatility and uncertainty. Until now, competitive advantages have been based on size, fame and acquired knowledge, on production capacity and the relationship with suppliers and producers. These aspects lose value against other, more decisive assets in the new audiovisual scenario: speed, flexibility, an innovative culture and the commitment and motivation of the people involved.

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