



Convergence, Content, and Interactivity

Reading 3-1

Convergence and Its Consequences

John Pavlik and Shawn McIntosh

EDITOR'S NOTE

*Convergence, or the integration of computing, telecommunications, and broadcast media in a single digital environment, is in many ways revolutionizing mass media and communication. The changes involved in the transfer from an analog mass communication system to one based on digital platforms are nothing short of sweeping, as this reading from **Converging Media** by John Pavlik and Shawn McIntosh lucidly explains. From interactive mechanisms for viewer and user feedback to enhanced content availability and nonlinear storytelling techniques, converging media are offering audiences more individualized choice than ever before. To take full advantage of the potential of digital media, communications professionals will have to learn new skills and be prepared to adapt to continual technological innovation and change. Terms highlighted in bold are defined in a glossary at the end of the reading.*

CONSIDER

1. Of the key differences between analog and digital media summarized in Table 3-1, which are the most important and why?
2. How, specifically, is convergence transforming the nature of mass communication, leading to a reexamination of the term "mass communication" itself?

3. In what ways do peer-to-peer file sharing sites such as Morpheus and Kazaa illustrate the power and possibilities of converging media?

The coming together of computing, telecommunications, and media in a digital environment is known as **convergence**, although scholars still do not agree on an exact and complete definition of the word. Convergence can also be used to mean the merging of Internet companies with traditional media companies, such as AOL with Time Warner. It can also be used in talking about specific types of media, such as print, audio, and video all converging into one digital media.

Even if a specific definition is still not agreed upon, convergence is transforming the very nature of mass communication, which of course has dramatic implications. These implications fall into four areas:

1. The content of communication.
2. The relationships between media organizations and their publics.
3. The structure of communication organizations.
4. How communications professionals do their work.

Convergence is leading to a complete reexamination of the term “mass” communication. This will be a major theme of this [reading], with a central premise being that although there will continue to be “mass” communication, in the sense that media companies and others will continue to produce messages for large audiences, frequently the members of those audiences may receive messages tailored to each individual, and audiences will become much more active in their engagement with mediated communication than they have been.

Fundamentally, convergence is transforming the kinds of media audiences have grown up with. In the pre-converged world of media, the process of mass communication consisted largely of a system of messages communicated through words, images, and sound. The converged media world still features these elements but brings with it new paradigms that are possible with digital, networked media.

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CONVERGENCE AND COMMUNICATION CONTENT

Stories told in a digital, online medium can make connections with other types of content much more easily than in any other medium [see Readings 2-2 and 7-1]. This is done primarily through the use of **hyperlinks**, or clickable pointers to other online content. This is just as true for news content as it is for other forms of mass communication, including advertising, public relations, and entertainment. For example, advertisements in a digital, online environment permit visitors to click on interactive ads or even images of products in which they can be purchased directly online. Or, in entertainment programming, hyperlinked content allows a viewer to explore a story in a nonlinear narrative, where the outcome of a story may be unchanged, but the path one takes to get there is unpredictable.

Content is much more fluid, dynamic, rapid, and global in an online environment, which enables better representation of events and processes in real life. Moreover, it is increasingly possible to obtain communications and content on demand. In the traditional media world, news, entertainment, or marketing information was broadcast or published on a schedule solely determined by the publisher or broadcaster. Technology exists currently that would allow the audience to even choose from which camera angles they wish to watch a sporting event, for example, and switch between angles or watch their own replays during the game. This is not to say that everyone will want to—or should be a television director whenever they watch television. Sometimes passively consuming media is all a person wants. But that is not to say that simply being able to be a more active participant in the kind of content one is watching won't alter how mass communication content and media in general are perceived.

Digitization is transforming both how and when media organizations distribute their content. They are no longer distributing content solely through traditional channels and instead are delivering digital content via the Internet, satellite, and a host of other digital technologies. They are increasingly making that content available 24 hours a day, with news organizations updating the news almost continuously, and to a

worldwide audience, leading to a reexamination of the tiered approach to distribution.

The production cycle and process is similarly being transformed by digital technology. In fact, the transformation may be even deeper in terms of media content production. Whether Hollywood motion pictures, television shows, news, books, magazines, newspapers, or online, the process of producing media content is rapidly becoming almost entirely digital. Movies are shot using digital cameras and edited on computers. Reporters working for television, radio, newspapers, or any other news operation capture their raw material with digital devices as well, editing their stories digitally. Even book authors typically write on a computer, with words increasingly remaining digital throughout the entire production process.

CONVERGENCE AND MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR AUDIENCE

The process of analog [non-digital] mass communication was largely one-way, from the source of a message to the receiver, or audience. The audience was relatively large, heterogeneous, and anonymous. Audience members had relatively few means by which to communicate either with each other on a mass scale or with the creators and publishers of mass communication content. Audiences in the age of convergence can communicate via e-mail, online forums, and other interactive media more easily and quickly with those who create and publish mass communication content. In addition, they can also create mass communication content themselves and reach far larger audiences for much lower costs than they could have with traditional media. They are generally not anonymous, although it is easy to create an online persona that bears little resemblance to one's real life.

Automation in digital media allows for mass communication organizations to keep detailed and automatically updated records on their audiences as they track their paths within their Web sites through intelligent software agents and programs known as **cookies**, which allow a Web site to recognize when a previous user comes to the Web site and gives them personalized content. This is invaluable information for media organizations to better understand an audience's media behaviors, preferences, and habits.

INCREASED MEDIA CONSUMPTION

As the media system continues to evolve toward a digital future, audience demand for media is growing. The "15th Annual Communications Industry Forecast," prepared by Veronis Suhler, showed that audiences were consuming more and more media as part of their daily lives.¹ The report indicated that the average person in the United States would spend 10.3 hours per day with various forms of information and entertainment media by the end of 2004, an increase of an hour since 1999. Notably, U.S. media consumers are shifting away from the use of traditional news and entertainment sources, including newspapers, magazines, broadcast television, and radio—media traditionally supported primarily by advertising. Audiences are shifting their media consumption toward digital media and consumer-supported media, such as cable and satellite television, books, and the Internet. Advertiser-supported media made up 69.1 percent of total media consumption in 1995 and just 60.9 percent in 1999; and the percentage is expected to fall to 54.7 percent by the end of 2004.

ACTIVE MEDIA PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION

Digital media make it easier than ever for the public to create and distribute media content, whether it is an original drawing done using illustration software, an animation or video, or a song sampled and mixed from current hits by famous recording artists.

Writing and music have led the way in media consumers creating content, although in music especially remixes of previously recorded (and copyrighted) music are more common than an amateur copying passages from a number of famous books and claiming it as his or her own work. Even before it became possible to download songs and send music files over the Internet, music fans were rerecording their favorite artists onto blank audio cassettes and making "garage band" recordings. Although by today's standards it was a laborious process, individuals could create music remixes of songs from their favorite band, for example, or certain songs from a variety of favorite artists. Distributing numerous copies of these tapes was usually too expensive and labor intensive to be worthwhile, and making subsequent copies from the copies noticeably

reduced the sound quality, which is not the case in the digital world.

DISTRIBUTION ALTERS THE BALANCE OF POWER

Audiences are increasingly active in their communication both with each other and with the creators of mass communication content [see Readings 1-3, 2-2, and 2-4]. This gives them much greater control over what media they consume and shifts some of the power away from media organizations providing content and toward the audience. Through **viral marketing**, the online equivalent of word-of-mouth advertising, a popular Web site's product or piece of content can potentially reach millions of online users in a very short time, all without corporate promotion or advertising. The success of **peer-to-peer** file-sharing programs such as Morpheus and Kazaa are examples of how an Internet audience shifts the balance of power away from media organizations, even though those organizations are the ones that created and provided that content in the first place.

Audiences aren't willing to wait for the evening news or the next day's paper for developments in a breaking story. "When you don't have access to radio or TV, the Internet is the best news source," said Jarvis Mak, a senior Internet analyst for NetRatings. "It can become, in a way, your immediately updated newspaper."²

Audiences can get their information and entertainment from literally thousands of sources around the world. Audiences aren't content to sit back and listen in silence to what the media report. They want their own voices to be heard. The Internet enables audiences around the world to participate in a global dialog about the world's events and issues and can bring individuals into direct contact with each other, though separated by thousands of miles and political and cultural boundaries. It is not clear what the net effect of this sea change in communication will be, but it is clear the foundation is being laid for a more connected and engaged global public.

FRAGMENTATION AND "THE DAILY ME"

These changes are not without some dangers, however. Actively choosing the media you want to see, hear, or read can narrow the scope of news items or entertainment that may be encountered by accident that unintentionally engage or entertain. Former MIT Media

Lab director, the late Michael Dertouzos, called the specialization of news to one's specific interests "The Daily Me." This phenomenon could fragment audiences into small groups of like-minded individuals who do not interact with other groups or with society as a whole and choose to receive only the news and information that reinforces their beliefs and values. Media fragmentation has already been a trend in analog media, and digital media can easily accelerate that trend. Cass Sunstein, law scholar and author of *Republic.com*, voices similar concerns over the social effects in a democratic society when media audiences become increasingly fragmented and stop discussing broad social and political issues [see Reading 9-4].

However, personalization and localization of news does have benefits in potentially getting the public to become more engaged in news and in helping them become better informed about current events. Making better connections between news analysis and primary source materials is one of the most important developments in online journalism. It is important because it helps to place stories in better context and can hold journalists accountable for their reporting by enabling the audience to compare a journalist's report with the actual primary source material about which he or she is reporting. This may help slow or even reverse the steady decline in credibility suffered by U.S. news organizations during the past quarter century.

Consider how MSNBC on the Web incorporated customization capability into its reporting. On its cable channel, MSNBC transmitted a report about the five most dangerous roads in America. On its Web site, not only did MSNBC provide the text of this report, but producers linked to a federal traffic database that permitted visitors to the site to enter a ZIP code and obtain traffic fatality data for that community and see which roads are the most dangerous in their town. Within 24 hours, the site had logged 68,000 visitors interested in learning about the most dangerous roads in their own communities.³

Table 3-1 summarizes the qualities of mass communication in the pre-converged (analog) and post-converged (online, digital) media worlds.

CONVERGENCE AND COMMUNICATIONS ORGANIZATIONS

In the pre-converged world, centralized media organizations created and published or broadcast content on predetermined schedules. A newspaper was printed

Table 3-1. Analog versus Digital Mass Communication

	Analog Mass Communication	Digital Mass Communication
Audience	Large, heterogeneous, anonymous, private. Bounded by geographic, cultural, and political boundaries. Passively read, watch, and listen to media to gratify needs.	Fragmented, homogeneous, known, and addressable, erosion of privacy. Geographic, political, and cultural boundaries less important. Increasingly active in consumption, creation, and participation in media.
Feedback	Few mechanisms for audience feedback and generally slow.	Instant, increasingly extensive through e-mail, online discussion forums.
Functions	Surveillance, correlation, cultural transmission, entertainment, marketing/advertising, mobilization.	Surveillance, correlation, cultural transmission, entertainment, e-commerce, mobilization.
Program/content availability	Centrally controlled schedule. One-way, dominated by centralized content providers.	Decreasingly centrally controlled schedule. Increasingly on-demand from a diverse array of voices. Less dominated by centralized content providers, often times many-to-many and audience-created.
Government regulation	Extensive for electronic, audio-visual media, little for print.	Little for print, reduced for traditional electronic media but uncertain and still evolving.
Storytelling	Stories are linear and static (i.e., they are fixed in print, on film or magnetic tape) and designed for mass audiences; modalities of expression are limited to those possible in each analog medium.	Linear and nonlinear, multimedia, interactive, exploratory, customizable, and dynamic. Content creator is more like a guide to knowledge, information, entertainment, and discovery.
Distribution channels	Separate, analog, one-to-many. Usually physical products.	Increasingly convergent, digital, many-to-many. Often not physical products.

and distributed within a certain period of time; a television broadcast appeared within a given time slot. Centralized means media organizations where content production and distribution, as well as marketing and other functions, are controlled by a central unit or individual. Internet-based media can be less centralized. Many divisions may determine the design or content of individual Web pages of an overall Web site. Web-based media are certainly not exempt from the economic consolidation of all mass media, but the nature of the Web permits more flexibility and adaptability in publishing or webcasting content.

SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC PRESSURES

The digital media system is a product of more than simply technological change. Economic, cultural, and political influences also are reshaping media, just as they have ever since Gutenberg printed his first Bible in 1455.

Governments, both domestic and international, regulate most media in an attempt to shape or control them or their content. This is true whether in the ana-

log or digital worlds of media. Broadcast media have traditionally been subject to extensive government regulation, whereas U.S. print media have been relatively free of government regulation, with strong legal independence established in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

Yet, in the digital, online realm, even "print" media organizations become subject to greater government regulation, whether in the United States or internationally. As newspapers move from the analog to the digital world and their products reach an increasingly global audience transmitted via satellite, telephone, or cable lines, they are finding themselves increasingly subject to international rules, regulations, and restrictions foreign governments may place upon the Internet. Libel and obscenity laws differ widely between countries, raising the question of whose version of libel should be used when an article published on the Internet libels someone according to local laws. Likewise, should Internet communication be considered under telephone regulations, because many people access it through telephone lines, or regulated according to the cable industry, because it is also available through cable modems? These are just some examples in which digital technology and convergence have sped ahead of our current legal framework.

CONCENTRATION OF MEDIA OWNERSHIP

Although there are many public service media, most media companies throughout the world try to make a profit. Many media companies are among the most profitable private enterprises in the world, with average profit margins often in excess of 20 percent a year—double the average for other industries.

Concentration of media ownership has been a growing trend in the analog world, and the same process is taking place in the digital media world. Convergence is in some ways fuelling media concentration, by leading traditional media giants such as Time Warner to join with an online colossus such as America Online, giving way in 2001 to AOL Time Warner. Although by mid-2002, with plummeting stock prices and executive shake-ups at a number of media giants such as AOL Time Warner [now called Time Warner] and Vivendi, some media analysts were saying that they moved too rapidly toward convergence without first figuring out a good business model. However, the trend is clear: Analog and digital media are rapidly being consolidated into the hands of a few, very large, very powerful, and very rich owners, an economic structure referred to as an **oligopoly** [see the readings in Chapter 4]. These media enterprises today are increasingly likely to be part of large, global media organizations publicly owned and accountable to shareholders whose main interest is the financial bottom line.

This centralized control over the signs and symbols of mediated communication can threaten the numbers and types of different voices heard on the Web. Inclusivity, diversity, and plurality of voices, both mainstream and marginal, have felt the increasing squeeze of global corporate owners eager to turn a double-digit profit in the online digital world. The trend is especially worrisome when a company can also control the means of distribution, such as Time Warner with its control of online access through America Online, the largest Internet Service Provider (ISP) in the United States, and through their Time Warner cable system with Time Warner's large amount of media content.

CONVERGENCE AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

With all the changes brought to mass communication because of convergence, it is obvious that the way communications professionals do their jobs will also change.

Just as the differences between print, video, and audio largely disappear in a digital media world, so will the divisions between print and electronic journalists, advertising and public relations professionals. Although it is likely journalists will still emphasize one or another field, print journalists will need to learn aspects of electronic journalism and electronic journalists will have to learn more about aspects of print journalism in order to fully utilize the digital media environment. Advertising and public relations professionals will have to learn how to best attract the attention of a public that encounters ever more media and in which the public is more active than in the past.

Just what constitutes a television or radio receiver, or TV or radio programming, is in a state of flux. Once it was simple. Radio programming was what a listener heard on a radio. Today, however, there are radio stations that transmit their programming via the Internet and listeners tune in via their computers. Moreover, these radio stations can include images, graphics, text, and video. For example, some Voice of America radio reporters have been trained in digital video shooting and editing and can now be "VJs," or videojournalists, webcasting their stories visually as well as through audio. With little more than a small digital video camera and a laptop computer with video editing software, journalists can now shoot, edit, and produce a professional-quality news video segment.

But in order to take advantage of digital media, new skills will have to be learned, and it will be more important than ever that the fundamental principles and ethics of each profession are not abandoned in the march toward the digital environment.

GLOSSARY

convergence the coming together of computing, telecommunications, and media in a digital environment. Convergence and the changes it is bringing are fundamentally changing many aspects of mass media and communication.

cookie information that a Web site puts on a user's local hard drive so that it can recognize when that computer accesses the Web site again. Cookies allow for conveniences like password recognition and personalization.

hyperlink a word, graphic, or image that is linked through HTML code to another Web page or media element either within the same Web site or in a different Web site on the World Wide Web.

oligopoly an economic structure in which a few very large, very powerful, and very rich owners control an industry or series of related industries.

peer-to-peer (P2P) a computer communications model in which all users have equal abilities to store, send, and accept communications from other users.

viral marketing spreading news and information about media content through word-of-mouth, usually via online discussion groups, chats, and e-mails, without utilizing traditional advertising and marketing methods.

NOTES

1. Veronis Suhler Releases 15th Annual Communications Industry Forecast. Retrieved May 15, 2002, from <http://www.veronissuhler.com/publications>.
2. Grenier, Melinda Patterson (updated 2002, January 16). Record Number of Office Workers Use Webcasts Last Month. *The Wall Street Journal Online*. Retrieved May 15, 2002, from <http://online.wsj.com/public/us>.



RELATED LINKS

- Converging Media: An Introduction to Mass Communication (http://wps.ablongman.com/ab_pavlik_convmedia_1)
- Lectures for *The News Lab* (http://www.columbia.edu/~jp35/news/lectures/all_lectures.html)
- News Lab: The Center for New Media (<http://www.columbia.edu/~jp35/news/>)
- Poynter Online—Convergence Chaser (<http://www.poynter.org/dg.lts/id.56/aid.40727/column.htm>)



FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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Reading 3-2

The Civil War Inside Sony

Frank Rose

EDITOR'S NOTE

*Among media conglomerates, Sony is in a unique position: It is perhaps the only international media company to have a major stake in both consumer electronics and entertainment, including movies, music, television, and videogames. The company's split personality is not without its problems, however. As Frank Rose writes in this article from *Wired* magazine, “Sony's electronics side needs to let customers move files around effortlessly, but its entertainment side wants to build in restraints, because it sees every customer as a potential thief,” that is, a nonpaying file-sharer. The tension between cross-platform file-sharing, preferred by Sony Electronics, and strict copyright protections, preferred by Sony Music, have put the company's internal divisions at odds. Sony Music wants to entertain you. Sony Electronics wants to equip you. The problem is that when it comes to digital media, their interests are diametrically opposed. This reading explains how the company is desperately trying*