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NEWSROOM CONVERGENCE

A TRANSNATIONAL COMPARISON

Abstract

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Abstract

Konvergenz im Newsroom

Neue Modelle der Redaktionsorganisation in Tageszeitungen im internationalen Vergleich

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Newsroom Convergence – The project

The project "Newsroom Convergence – A transnational comparison" was initiated by *Medienhaus Wien*. Subsidies from Austria's KommAustria (Austrian Communications Authority) made it possible to cooperate with convergence experts from Spain and Germany in order to compare international experiences.

In a world of globalising media markets, knowledge on the development of convergence journalism and insights on how to foster quality journalism in this context can only be gained in an international context. Nevertheless, comparative research on the topic is scarce.

We tried to bridge this gap by designing a transnational research project, comparing six case studies from Austria, Germany and Spain. The study "Newsroom Convergence. A transnational comparison" was undertaken by Medienhaus Wien/Austria, University for Applied Sciences Darmstadt/Germany and Universidad Miguel Hernàndez Elche/Spain. The research team examined professional attitudes and practices in six convergent newspaper newsrooms in Austria, Germany and Spain: two case studies in each country. The case studies were designed with newsroom observations and in-depth interviews with selected journalists and news managers.

Backgrounds and core results of the project were presented and discussed at international conferences in Lisbon as well as in Lucerne (MAZ/EJO annual conference), and were selected for presentation at DGPUK's annual meeting in Lugano in spring 2008.

Publication of the results in international journals such as "Journalism practice" (London) and "Media Perspektiven" (Frankfurt/Main) are in preparation, as well as a contribution for an anthology edited by the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

Media convergence changes journalism

Convergence is the keyword for one of the most amazing, new and ongoing processes changing mass communication, media companies and media landscapes. It tends to initiate widespread changes in the organisation of journalistic work as well as in economic strategies; it also follows technological convergence developments and is accompanied by new phenomena, as subsumed with the specialist term "Web 2.0", allowing millions of recipients to participate as new producers of online content by using the interactive potential of the Internet. In addition, convergence changes the daily routine of journalists.

Several factors have recently sparked off media convergence, such as the decrease in newspaper sales and the stagnation of television audiences, a ferocious competition for advertising income, the growth of internet news users, the introduction of budgetary cuts, together with the need of producing news content for several platforms within the same media company. Media may benefit from convergence strategies. Newsrooms from different departments can share sources and file material, offer common advertising packages, develop cross promotion and even use the same facilities and office space. Multimedia diversification also allows to diversify potential risks and to enter in new sectors with growth potential.

Convergence refers to "some combination of technologies, products, staffs and geography among the previously distinct provinces of print, television and online media" (Singer, 2004: 3). The phenomenon might be analysed at least from four perspectives: technological, management, communicative and professional, which are intertwined in a media environment in continuous evolution (García Avilés, 2006). Convergence is reshaping the landscape of journalism in a variety of ways for, as Pavlik puts it, "newsroom structures, journalistic practices and news content are all evolving" (2004: 28). The process has been described "in terms of (increasing) cooperation and collaboration between formerly distinct media newsrooms and other parts of the modern media company" (Deuze, 2004:140).

Professional convergence is the main focus of our study, since the integration of media generates changes in the work of journalists and newsroom organization. Digital

systems allow journalists to share data files (audio, video and text) in order to elaborate content for the various platforms, with increasing versatility. Newsroom structures, journalistic practices, and news content are all evolving. The practice of journalism therefore is undergoing intense changes, which, in turn, are influencing its professional nature.

Six case studies in three countries

Six case studies were chosen in order to gain insights in quite different ways of organising convergent newsrooms.

The Austrian case of *Österreich* represents a daily newspaper and multimedia production that was only founded in September 2006, emphasizing on multimedia production from the start. *Der Standard* represents a completely different model: This daily was the first to publish a web-edition of a newspaper in German language in 1995, now reaching a high number of users (1,2 million unique clients monthly) and being economically successful. Amazingly, in this case print and online production are completely separated.

In Spain*, La Verdad Multimedia* is part of *Vocento's* convergence. *Vocento* was the first Spanish media group that implemented a regional multimedia strategy as its core business in 2001. The company currently owns twelve large regional multimedia groups that comprise a newspaper, its online edition, a local radio station, a local television network and an advertising agency. The second Spanish case study is *Unidad Editorial*, owned by the Italian group *Rizzoli*, was formed in May 2007, as a result of the merger and acquisition of *Recoletos's* and *El Mundo's* media assets, and it is currently launching a process of convergence among their media.

The German case of the *Welt/Morgenpost-Group* in Berlin is interesting as it opened a joint newsroom for three daily papers (*Die Welt*, *Welt Kompakt* and *Berliner Morgenpost*), a Sunday paper (*Welt am Sonntag*) and the associated online versions, including *Welt-online TV* and other formats on the Internet, in 2006. The challenge here lies not only in combining print and Internet, but also in integrating the various print

titles, which must still retain their own profile. The *Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine* (*HNA*) in Kassel is an example of a regional newspaper that produces for print and online in a joint open-plan office. What is most striking is the video commitment of the editorial office and innovative Web 2.0 formats such as a regional Wiki.

To gain an insight into advantages and disadvantages, expectations and disappointments, the research team – in each case researchers from at least two of the participating countries - made observations and interviewed editorial and managerial staff in these six newsrooms. The interviewees were:

Österreich, Vienna:
Gert Edlinger, CEO

Christian Nusser, chief editor

Maria Jelenko, chief editor oe24.at (online edition)

Rita Davidson, head of communications

Der Standard/derstandard.at, Vienna:
Alexandra Föderl-Schmid, chief editor

Gerfried Sperl, chief editor (until 07/2007)

Christoph Prantner, section editor international politics

Gerlinde Hinterleitner, chief editor derstandard.at

Rainer Schüller, coordinator online-edition

El Mundo, Madrid:
Iñaki Gil, assistant director

Miguel Gómez, chief section editor

Isabel Longhi, section editor of Communication

Pablo Jáuregui, section editor of Science

Juantxo Cruz, Director of Design

Olalla Novoa, online breaking news section editor

Maria Gámez, news reporter

La Verdad, Murcia:

Antonio Semitiel, Multimedia Chief Editor

Joaquín García, Information Director

José María Esteban, Chief Editor

Daniel Gidrón, CEO

Die Welt/Berliner Morgenpost, Berlin:

Christoph Keese, Chief editor Welt am Sonntag/Welt online

Ansgar Mayer, Axel Springer Academy

Oliver Michalsky, Head of the Online Section, Welt/Morgenpost newspaper group

Romanus Otte, Managing Editor, Zeitungsgruppe Welt/Morgenpost

HNA, Kassel:

Jens Nähler, Head of the Online Section, Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine

Tibor Pésza, Head of the Local Section, Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine

Ines Pohl, Head of the Political Section, Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine

Horst Seidenfaden, Chief Editor, Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine

A convergence matrix

Our hypothesis was that several models of newsroom convergence might be found and defined according to various parameters, which influence the production of news. For the comparison of the six case studies in Germany, Spain and Austria a matrix of more than 30 convergence descriptors was developed.

Interests started in researching different types of newsroom convergence, in seeing the organization of editorial workflows, in analyzing influences of new newsroom models on journalist's work as well as on qualification needs. Different national economic and political backgrounds and specific of media-markets have been considered, e.g. restrictions in cross-media-ownership in Germany and Austria, whereas Spanish law allows the development of strong Multimedia-houses (as in the case of La Verdad/Murcia) since the 1980s. The much higher rate of internet penetration and fast increasing percentage of users in Central European markets (about double that of

Spain), drew attention some years earlier to web-development in traditional publishers in Austria and Germany. This development even made some of these publishers pioneers in the production of information-production in the internet (as in the case of Der Standard/Vienna since 1995).

Considering and comparing these national specifics further research interests were to develop adequate descriptors to analyse newsroom layout, project scopes and strategic concepts. Key-points are

- ways and means of implementation of convergence processes in newsrooms,
- workflows and news flow,
- ways of communication and cooperation of journalists and managements,
- multimedia- and content-responsibilities,
- degrees of multiskilling of content-producers,
- training efforts.

Many more have been deduced.

Finally, the aim was to draw conclusions on success metrics for the implementation of convergent newsrooms.

The analysis of these convergence descriptors on different levels allows a comparison of convergence processes apart from different national preconditions. As a matter of course, the results may not provide converging media houses with a "convergence formula", ready to be applied on every case. Multifactor analysis allows

- the identification of different models of convergence as well as
- the identification of key factors and core questions to be considered when planning or evaluating convergence strategies.

Three models of newsroom convergence

To sum up the results of the analysis, three different models may be outlined:

➔ **Full integration**: Architecture and infrastructure for multi-channel production are combined in one newsroom, controlled via a central news and workflow

management. Apart from this characterisation via external features, convergence also is a strategic goal. Content is first, the distribution on different platforms is subordinated to content production. "Online first" (as the slogan of Springer/Die Welt) is one symbol for a paradigmatic shift from newspaper production towards multimedia production. Even if not yet performed in real-life as deeper research of the case-studies revealed. Full integration also means that training for all journalists is provided in order to make them fit for multimedia production. Full convergence of all platforms under the same ownership is the primary management aim.

None of the six case studies could be totally assigned to this model, although *El Mundo* and *Die Welt*/*Berliner Morgenpost* come closest to full integration. In El Mundo group's large new newsroom in Madrid some 900 journalists are working for 3 different newspapers (El Mundo, the sports-daily Marca and the economy-paper Expansion) but not yet working together. In the groups flag-ship El Mundo the integration of internet-production, permanent cooperation within departments is established step-by-step. In some sectors – for example the science-department of El Mundo - full integration of web and print and journalist's daily multimedia-thinking and production already is considered normal. In Die Welt/Morgenpost this process is on the way – even more complicated as contents shall be produced for four newspapers (the 3 different editions of Welt and for Morgenpost). In these companies in Madrid and Berlin, full convergence as a managerial aim has not yet been accomplished, but preconditions have been set up. The first and most important step in these cases is management commitment to the integration of various platforms.

➔ **Cross Media**: In this model, journalists work in different newsrooms for different platforms, but are interconnected through multimedia-coordinators and/or –routines. Management drives cooperation and communication between the media as well as cross promotion measures. Journalists remain platform-experts, multiskilling is the exception to the rule and not actively fostered by the management. Convergence is not considered a strategic necessity, but a tool. *Österreich* and Vocento's *La Verdad* come closest to this model. *La Verdad*, largest newspaper in the Spanish Murcia Region, redefined itself as "multimedia publisher" in 2001 when it integrated into

its overall strategy the activities of its local radio network as well as the daily production of TV-news on local level. Contents are promoted cross-media, the multimedia-manager and the news editor coordinate daily multimedia production whereas the journalists themselves only occasionally cross borders, e.g. as print-editors specialized in some field analyzing also in TV or radio-news or vice versa. Due to Vocentos new strategy *La Verdad* will now be focusing more on the internet as core strategic platform, which could accelerate the integration process of all distribution-channels whereas until now the cross-media-strategy with separate newsrooms but organised coordination and cooperation had been considered more applicable. The model of *Österreich* is an interesting example of a very new cross-media concept, establishing right from the beginning (only in 2006) a new newsroom architecture – but still having journalists working as platform specialists for print editions, online-news or Web-TV. Behind *Österreich's* strongly promoted multimedia concept, from its start in 2006 until present time, is an important technological and management concept. The basic newsroom concept might be fundamental to go ahead with a convergence process but so far multiskilling in journalism is more the exception than the rule. Press and Internet live apart in one newsroom. Coordination and content management is made easier by the means of the big newsroom in Vienna city centre.

➔ **Isolated Platforms**: Cooperation is neither implemented systematically in news gathering, nor in news production or news distribution. Journalism sections remain separated; newsroom design does not strive towards integration. The boarders and differences between online, print, radio and/or television sections in the same media company do not seem surmountable. Convergence is not even seen as an appropriate means of quality improvement. Cooperation occurs bottom up and more or less by chance, depending on single journalists. *Der Standard* in Vienna represents this model. Surprisingly, the autonomous model in this case appears to have been one of the factors for success, as *Der Standard* has got the most frequented website among Austria's newspapers. It is one of the very few examples of an originally print-based internet-company now being in the black with its Internet-branch earning money. Still this system of isolated platforms might be analysed as a management weakness

in creating cross-media cooperation as well as a strategy to give more space to the single platform to concentrate on its success. Especially in the early days of internet development this could be helpful. Permanent shifts of internet and multimedia strategies of traditionally press-minded managements and editorial staffs have rather destroyed than helped to develop future-minded convergence processes. In many cases periods of "splendid isolation" of media-platforms within the same company have not been at all promising either. In others, as *Der Standard* in Austria, this surprisingly has been one of the keys to success. But in the long run the isolation model does not seem forward-looking. On the one hand cooperation links will it will be even more difficult. Newsroom-architecture, technology, management, journalism cultures have been growing apart over years and now have to come closer. On the other hand steps towards media-convergence now can be undertaken with experienced staff on both sides: press and online experts on an eye to eye level.

Success metrics for multi-channel media production

Since the discussion about convergence has now been going on for nearly a decade, full integration regularly has been considered a silver bullet. This was evident when talking to media managers in Austria, Germany and Spain: Multimedia and multi-channel production are buzzwords that are used with ease, convergence is considered as a symbol of modernity. Looking deeper at work processes and journalistic production, we found out that reality is still differing from wishful thinking. For the cases observed in Austria, Germany and Spain, a statement of Ulrik Haagerup (2002), *Danish Broadcasting Corporation* news chief and an expert on newsroom innovation, is still very much the truth: „Media convergence is like teenage sex. Everybody thinks everybody else is doing it. The few who are actually doing it aren't very good at it."

As a result of our research we propose to rethink the attitude towards convergence. Newsroom layout is not the first thing to be considered, nor is convergence primarily about synergies. In all of the models explored news production for different channels is changing the conditions of newsroom organization and journalistic work. Newsroom layout doesn't seem to be the first precondition for this

change. Even in the model of isolated platforms, the need for coordination and cooperation is growing. To fulfil these needs, media workers have to learn to take into account the changing demands of audiences, the consequences for their news company and the effects on their work.

Convergence concepts have to start from reflection on concepts and strategies. Management has to drive convergence. Without strategic decisions and top-down action, convergence processes will hardly start, or will only develop very slowly. One of the obvious key-factors to be found throughout case-studies in the three countries involved and the very different multimedia-approaches researched is: if there is no well-structured detailed analysis right from the beginning, it will be impossible to successfully establish new cooperation or further convergence processes.

In the worst case there is neither an overall vision accompanied nor a clear step-by-step concept for convergence. Changing convergence-strategies permanently may lead to unrest in the management as well as in journalistic staff and very often provokes collateral damages instead of new cooperation and cross media perspectives.

In developing concepts for better coordination of different platforms and newsrooms, the matrix developed in our research project may be of help to structure strategic considerations and to develop convergence concepts. It will be presented in detail in publications in international journals and conferences throughout the next year.

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Medienhaus Wien (Mediahouse Vienna) is an Austrian institute dedicated to research and further education in the field of media. Our Team has many years of experience in journalism, media education and media research. One of our goals is to support quality in the media by applied research and the development of just-in-time concepts. More information on *Medienhaus Wien* and the authors as well as a portfolio of our projects can be found on our website http://www.medienhaus-wien.at

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