CONVERGING VERSUS DIVERGING VOICES IN THE NEWSROOMS OF MULTIMEDIA ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract: The evolution of technology has gradually transformed, over the years, the media organizations worldwide. Media convergence, regarded as a new perspective in journalism, which combines profession, technology and new practices in the newsroom, brought significant transformations in the activity and structure of media organizations. This paper shows that while the production and editorial operations are converging at the microlevel, divergences occur at the level of the individual journalists, who are directly challenged by the changes in their everyday work. Depending on the manner they construct their representations of professional identity and values, the journalists diverge in their way of accepting or rejecting change. The corpus of the article is made by semi-structured interviews with Romanian and American journalists and notes from field observation of digital operations in various newsrooms in Romania and the United State of America. The author chose to employ qualitative methods, such as observation and interviews with journalists from broadcast, online and print media, in order to illustrate the voices of media professionals affected by different aspects of convergence. This paper is conceptually supported by the theoretical framework of constructivism.

Key words: digital, convergence, newsroom, multimedia organizations, journalists, challenges.

Introduction: Why Media Convergence?

In the last 20 years, the evolution of technology radically transformed the activity of journalists worldwide. The interlocking of computers, information technology, telecommunication networks and the media content generated by newspapers, radio and television gave birth to a phenomenon called media convergence. Convergence is the process of social construction of a new technological system for news production, including not only adopting and adapting digital news production systems and devices, but also redefining work practices and newsroom layouts, rethinking journalistic roles and values, and multiplying publication platforms. It is an innovation process that is locally developed and historically embedded, by merging of journalistic resources, forcing the development of multiple versions of the news for print, television, and the web all within a single news organization. Media professionals are required to extend their skills beyond their traditional comfort levels, sometimes working with people from different professional backgrounds, and generally facing changes in their professional routines and organizational cultures (Boczkowski, 2004; Rabasca, 2001).

Through various digital presentation platforms, or media industries, companies which have merged or formed strategic alliances in order to develop new business models, the studies of convergence have focused primarily on the technologies. Convergence is a revolutionary form of journalism which is evolving in many parts of the world; therefore it may vary from country to country, from culture to culture both within countries and media companies. Media convergence is influenced by the power of digital technology, and the legal and economical factors in various countries and media trusts. The success of convergence depends on having journalists who could think multiple media and who are comfortable working across several media platforms (Haile, 2003). Convergence is what takes

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place in the newsroom as editorial staff members work together to produce multiple products for multiple platforms to reach a mass audience with interactive content, often on a 24/7 timescale (Quinn & Filak, 2005).

Convergence transforms the consumers of media products from passive readers, viewers and listeners to active audience, therefore could be regarded as a tool in the hands of a more and more fragmented audience. The public is able to get involved in the stories because converged communication provides multiple tools to select the level of interactivity while self-directing the content delivery. Media convergence also allows audiences to interact with or even generate mass media content. Thanks to convergence, consumers can now control when, where and how they access and relate to information of all kinds (Sutu, 2011). Quinn and Filak (2005) argue that convergence should be driven by the significance of the news event. They reached a simpler definition: convergence is about doing journalism and telling stories using the most appropriate medium for telling the story. According to Quinn and Filak, the importance of the news event should dictate the depth and type of coverage, and influence the size of the team involved (2005:12). Media convergence is also applied as an economic strategy, for media industries, companies which have merged or formed strategic alliances in order to develop new business models (Chan-Olmsted, 2014; Killebrew, 2005).

Romanian media is currently going through the process of adopting and implementing convergence at organizational, technological and economical level. For instance, multimedia editors and producers decide on the most appropriate way of covering the event, on the content and size of the team. As an example, for an accident with six dead and dozens of casualties resulted from a bus falling off a bridge, in Tulcea, Eastern Romania, on October 1st, 2010, producers from Romanian Public Television decided on the following working scheme: one team made of a local correspondent and a cameraman in Tulcea, and another one in Bucharest. Along with the reporter and the cameraman, the crew in Bucharest included four additional members, the technical crew for the live satellite broadcast. The team in Bucharest transmitted live from the emergency hospital where the victims were brought by helicopter, while the crew in Tulcea recorded pictures and sound for a news report from the location. The multimedia teams provided live and recorded video, audio and on-line content for TVR1, TVR2, TVR3, TVR Info, as well as for the Public Television 24/7 updated website (Sutu, 2013).

The individual journalists are those directly challenged by the changes in their everyday work. This paper approaches the transformations brought to the newsroom practices from the point of view of Romanian and American professionals, who use new communication tools. The article focuses on the representations the journalists and managers who were interviewed for this study attribute to media convergence as a phenomenon they have to deal with in their everyday activities. As a result of the evolution of media technology and the emergence of new economic challenges, Romanian and American journalists and managers have been forced to adopt new work practices in the newsrooms or in their independent work. The data are based on facts and situations observed during research. This article is conceptually supported by the theoretical framework of constructivism, a theory that has the power to explain what is known about a certain topic at a given moment, (Godfrey-Smith, 2003; Dubin, 1978).

**Constructivism and Convergence**

According to constructivist theories, people are actively involved in constructing reality, which they study as a social product of interaction and negotiations between various actors and institutions. Constructivist epistemology asserts that the reality and knowledge are the result of both social and cognitive processes (Flick, 2009; Bryman, 2004; Godfrey-Smith, 2003). Thomas Schwandt and Bonnie S. Brennan consider that the reality is socially constructed, therefore they support the active role of the social science scholars who, through their experience and contextual accounts, guide those who read
their studies to construct their knowledge about the world. Constructivist paradigm supports the idea that the object of knowledge is not a copy or reproduction of the reality, but a new way of understanding and translating reality. The knowledge is therefore the result of direct interaction between the objects of study and the reality. Furthermore, the reality is filtered and contextualized by the individuals that construct the reality through their lifetime experience and knowledge, as a purely subjective endeavor (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The qualitative scientists rely on connotative meanings and language interpretations, through which they understand and explain concepts related to human experiences (Schwandt, 2000; Brennan, 2013).

In the case of the studies of mass communication, the constructivists approached the direction of systematic explanations of daily practices, through cultural interpretation. More precisely, the communication scholars insisted on the manner different social groups use cultural artifacts to construct a version of reality, to articulate and support a certain sense of identity or to point out certain forms of control or domination (Williams, 1983; Pauly, 1991). Researchers who approached media convergence warned about the media monopoly as a result of media consolidation when big companies gain control of the supply of raw materials such as reports, stories and scripts, products such as newscasts and movies and distribution such as platforms of television, online or radio (Kolodzy, 2009; McChesney, 2003). The scientists underlined the role of cultural differences in building the identity of the journalist working for new multimedia environment (Wilkinson, 2009; Kraeplin & Criado, 2005). The researchers also highlighted the challenge of integration of the new skills and values generated by convergence journalism practice in the traditional media culture (Filak, 2009; Dupagne & Garrison, 2006). Numbers of studies on convergence approached as well media managers’ actions in shaping convergent news operations and creating new roles in the newsroom (Fisher, 2009; Killebrew, 2005).

Method

The author of this study chose to use qualitative methodology in order to scientifically investigate the various aspects of convergence from the point of view of journalists and media managers. The scientific inquiry is inductive, built as a result of field observation and inquiry. The qualitative inquiry analyzes the subjective meanings and the social production of events and practices, by collecting non-standard data, and analyzing texts and images, rather than numbers and statistics. When studying latent practices and phenomena, the attempts of identification, measurement and adjustment to specific statistics, which quantitative traditional methodology does, might not bring positive results. As a matter of fact, social science scholars argued that the nature of the research subject points out the most appropriate methodology, and underlined the lack of productivity when it comes to debates on the best method. The qualitative inquiry is considered a type of long time field observation, carried out in the proximity of the chosen phenomena, in order to investigate new perspectives and social context forms. Through extension, qualitative methodology fulfills the role of highlighting the essential differences and distinctive features of the phenomenon under study (Flick, 2009; Baran & Davis, 2000). Qualitative research stands out for appropriateness of methods and theories, subjective perspectives of the participants, reflexivity of the researcher, variety of approaches and methods, the ability to understand the phenomena from the interior, construction of reality, usage of text and language as an empirical material, and flexibility of the research design (Jensen & Jankowski, 2002; Flick, 2009; Babbie, 2013). Qualitative methodology has been highly useful in mass communication research, either when investigating journalism education or practices and roles in newsrooms: selection and information gathering, production or delivery of the news. Furthermore, the work of qualitative social scientists helped in establishing various cultural environments appropriate for studying the new media practices which are developing in the context of the new technologies. As a matter of fact, the qualitative inquiry was the main method used in the last decade when examining the implications of adopting and
implementing media convergence. When studying the adoption of convergence in a single ownership company with various media platforms, or the merger of different ownership companies, or through comparing multimedia newsrooms using new technologies in different countries, the researchers used one or mixed qualitative methods: case studies, observation, semi-structured or focus group interviews (Dupagne & Garrison, 2006; Aviles et al., 2008; Singer 2004; Marjoribanks, 2003; Kung-Shankleman, 2003).

This article employed qualitative interviews, extensively used in mass communication research, especially in the study of media organizations and their specific institutional procedures. The semi-structured interview is considered by social scientists “one of the most powerful methods in qualitative research because it allows investigators to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves” (McCracken, 1988:9). When researching mass communication topics, the qualitative interview is a valuable methodological tool, which generates the necessary data for building research questions (Spradley, 1979; Briggs, 1986). They support the utilization of qualitative interview as a useful method to provide essential research data and argue that the in-depth interview is an active process of construction of reality, through circumstances that generate meanings that the interviewer might not be aware or willing to acknowledge (Gobrium & Holstein, 2002).

The use of qualitative interview in researching media convergence has the role to facilitate the explication of the concept of media convergence and its implications for the work of journalists or newsrooms activities, to highlight the changes in the organizational culture and the professional identity of the journalists, to understand the challenges it brings to the values, roles and routines of media professionals. There is no definite rule on the ideal number of interviewees, but McCracken and Wengraf recommend eight respondents in order to obtain relevant findings from semi-structured interviews (McCracken, 1988; Wengraf, 2001). The author of this study selected twenty respondents, ten Romanian and ten American journalists and managers that have the ability to illustrate a wide range of indicators of the changes urged by media convergence.

Ten Romanian and ten American media professionals from broadcast, online and print media, with experience both in traditional and digital media were selected in order to provide relevant answers. The interviewees were affected by different aspects of media convergence, such as adopting new work practices in the newsroom, delivering the message through multiple channels and using social media as a communication tool with the target audience. Field observation was carried out in the newsrooms in the United States and Romania, researching various aspects of news gathering, production, post-production, delivery of the news and feedback from public, throughout a ten months period, from March to December 2014. Different media outlets were selected for analysis, from a local newsroom such as the Innovation News Center in Gainesville, Florida, to the News Department of the Romanian Public Television.

The research questions are most appropriate in new areas of scientific investigation when little is known about the relationships among variables and in which there is not enough literature that is applicable (Shoemaker et al., 2004). In this particular case, there is a legitimate need for inductive research as the area of media convergence in Romania is still a virgin territory for researchers. The research questions used in this qualitative investigation are:

RQ1: What is the professional representation of convergence for the Romanian and American journalists and managers?

RQ2: How does media convergence influence the activities in multimedia organizations?

RQ3: What are the reactions to the challenges and difficulties generated by the adoption of convergent operations in the newsrooms?
Findings: Converging and Diverging

The representations of convergence are determined by the specific media elements the Romanian and American journalists use frequently or the specific features they prefer in their everyday work routine. Both Romanian and American journalists interviewed in this study emphasized the ability to deliver the information in real time, using a computer software, on the online outlet of the media organization, using writing, sound and pictures, as well as posting on social media (Piperiu, 2014; Taban, 2014; Dawson, 2014; Woods, 2014; Wright, 2014). For those who welcome the new technologies in their everyday activities, media convergence is regarded as a perpetual need of the journalists to learn and train themselves in order to resist on a market dominated by the evolution of technology (Dinca, 2014; Morgan, 2014; Woods, 2014). Convergent communication is a system where journalists evolve every day, as they learn new writing styles and techniques, as well as use different approaches according to the particular medium they choose to deliver the information (Blajan, 2014; Alston, 2014). “The attention of the journalist is no longer focused exclusively on the television, radio or newspaper they are working for; one person thinks multiple platforms now. Reporters are required to be able to deliver content for differed media outlets, as well as to choose the most appropriate medium for a particular message” (Piperiu, 2014). Raluca Brumariu, manager of the newsroom of the Romanian Public Television, showed that media convergence broadens the communication and accelerates time; audience has the privilege to select the medium that is more convenient, easy to use, or closest to their system of beliefs, among various sources of information (Brumariu, 2014).

“The communication in the convergent system is not like a one way street anymore, but has become a real conversation between the media outlet and the public, where both parties bring their share of ideas” (Dawson, 2014). The crucial social and political issues are debated on social media and the important media corporations and businesses are a constant presence in the virtual space, through the Facebook pages and Twitter posts of the organizations or individual journalists (Carpea, 2014; Radulescu, 2014; Newport, 2014; Alston, 2014). Two editors in chief from two different countries and two different media systems emphasized that their organization is now able to reach different target audiences: those who buy the papers are traditionalists, as they grew up reading print, while those who follow the websites and Facebook pages are much younger. The Facebook page provides instant feedback and the media organization and the public are constantly connected (Dinca, 2014; Wright, 2014). “We are making the passage from the old, rigid structure of the traditional newsroom, to a flexible, mobile, newsroom, interested in innovation and initiative. We need a different vision and new abilities to deliver the information to a young audience, such as posting on Twitter before writing and broadcasting on radio and television” (Morgan, 2014). The manager of the Innovaton News Center in Gainesville, Matt Sheehan as well as the online editor and blogger for cursdeguvermare.ro, Anne Marie Blajan, think that members of the audience have become, at the same time, consumers, contributors and creators of content, as well as agents of promotion and diffusion of different types of information and messages (Sheehan, 2014; Blajan, 2004).

The departments that have traditionally operated on different platforms are now united into a unique newsroom for broadcast, print, website and social media. This way, the same journalist reports for broadcast, writes for the print issue, updates the website and posts messages on Facebook and Twitter. The divergent voices in the newsroom complain that the writers and reporters are under time pressure and struggle with limited resources to deliver content for 3 or 4 types of media simultaneously (Dinca, 2014; Blackstone, 2014). The hierarchy of the traditional media organization is transformed, as the reporter covering a certain event writes, produces and posts the information, controlling the content for broadcast and online. There is no editorial filter, as only one person bears the responsibility of the content, and mistakes and errors can occur easily. The journalists interviewed for this paper bring examples of misquoting or taking statements out of context. For instance, when reporters take fragments
of interviews from Facebook or Twitter, and post them on the website of their organizations, without checking the facts or contacting the persons involved in the news story (Taban, 2014; Russell, 2014; Budinsky, 2014).

The multimedia journalist faces the challenge to adjust to different media, after a lifetime training and practice in one traditional medium, either print, television or radio. Broadcast journalists find it very difficult to write for online, switching formats sometimes three or four times a day, as they transition from the brief, succinct style of broadcast to the more elaborate content for online (Blackstone, 2014; Piperiu, 2014). Doing much more than their traditional job sometimes means less quality, as the attention and resources are divided. Ginger Blackstone, former producer for CNN, said that the producers are in charge not only with coordinating reporters for radio programs, but also with writing articles for online and posting on social media. “We did more than producing a television talk show, we were also responsible with creating animated, interactive graphics for broadcast and online” (Blackstone, 2014).

The Romanian and American journalists’ radical reactions to the frustrations or hardship generated by the convergent operations in their media organization are early retirement, resignation and taking a line of work elsewhere: PR, teaching, private business (Piperiu, 2014; Taban, 2014). Their moderate reactions were moving to a different position and taking different job responsibilities in the same media organization (Budinsky, 2014; Carpea, 2014). The media managers from Romania and the United States of America had both moderate and radical approaches to the various reactions their employees expressed when their organizations adopted and implemented convergent operations. One moderate measure was to create positions especially adjusted to the skills and abilities of the employees in the multimedia newsroom, such as rewards for those who are motivated, hardworking and showing initiative in the adoption of convergence (Sheehan, 2014; Woods, 2014). Managers’ radical approach was to get rid of those employees that refuse to adjust to the changes, and oppose progress, as they might negatively influence the others. Chan-Olmsted used the “moving bus” metaphor when referring to making the best decision for the organization. “Those who are opposing the change are welcome if they stay quiet in their seats; however, if they move, make noise and disturb the other passengers, they are thrown out of the bus at the next stop” (Chan-Olmsted, 2014).

Conclusions

The journalists interviewed for this article went from one type of media to another, had to learn new technologies, to switch jobs and fulfill multiple positions, to change work routines, to learn how to write, produce and package for different media, and to use social media in order to promote their journalistic products. They are actively involved in constructing their representations of convergence, according to their previous experience in print or broadcast, their position in the newsroom, their specific skills and the responsibilities they held in the traditional media organizations they worked for in the past. All the professional values and practices the interviewees referred to during this scientific investigation influence the way they understand, define and apply media convergence: from a journalistic, technological, organizational or audience perspective. The findings illustrate the constructivist theory according to which the reality is filtered and contextualized by the individuals that construct the reality through their lifetime experience and knowledge (Flick, 2009; Bryman, 2004; Godfrey-Smith, 2003). The journalists are actively involved in constructing the reality in which they operate, in this case the convergent system, seen as a social product of interaction and negotiations in the newsroom. Convergent communication is represented as a process of social construction of a new technological system for news production, including not only adopting and adapting digital news production systems and devices, but also redefining work practices and newsroom layouts, rethinking journalistic roles and values, and multiplying publication platforms.
As the journalists and managers come from various types of press, such as online, print and broadcast, but also from two countries, Romania and the United States, that have different media systems, the results of this study show a multitude of points of view on the representation of convergence and its influence on the practices in multimedia organizations. The approaches of convergence of the Romanian journalists and managers are rather on the idealistic side, as they have just begun to experiment with the new technologies. The Americans have already applied different working models and strategies, depending on the stages of implementation of media convergences in their newsrooms. Therefore, their answers reflect various reactions to the results of adopting new newsroom practices, learning new skills, experimenting communication and feedback, varying from enthusiasm to skepticism or rejection.

The validity of the data provided by some of the respondents is further verified through the questions the researcher asks other interviewees; it also plays an important part in highlighting the potential discrepancies and show latent problems that are difficult to impossible to identify at the beginning of the research process. However, further research is necessary to investigate the changes in the Romanian media organizations, at a wider range, through quantitative methodological tools. Therefore, this particular research has the potential to provide a valuable starting point for the scientists interested in investigating the effects of new technologies on media organizations, either in Romania or elsewhere.

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