

Something Old, Something New:

Redefining Convergence of the New ICTs and the More Established Media

By Mavic Cabrera-Balleza

Media used to mean only one thing—public institutions that report the news, such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television, as well as those that provide entertainment. While there are several forms such as print, broadcast, audio-visual, popular and folk media, the word still meant one thing when we spoke about it. Today, however, we cannot speak about media without dividing it into “old” and “new.” The old is associated with analogue forms, while the cool new corresponds to media available via digital technology.

In addition to the mostly analogue technology applied at the back end, “old media” refers to the more established, or institutionalised, media such as print, broadcast, and audio-visual. How about: “Old media” refers to the more established, or institutionalised, media, that is, print, broadcast and audio-visual which, while now applying digital technology from production to post-production, predate the digital boom. This is also the reason why I prefer the term “more established media” to “old media.” “Old” connotes something passé, obsolete and no longer useful and relevant. “New media,” on the other hand, is the generic term for the many different forms of electronic communication made possible through the use of computer technology. New media includes websites, audio and video streaming, chat rooms, chain e-mail, and online communities, among others.

Turning to the Same Page

In today’s IT-crazed world, convergence is an overused, sometimes misused, word. In one of the first

instances I used the word four years ago, I remember a colleague remarked, “Please, let’s not use that word in our discussion because it’s too corporate. Civil society will not be able to identify with it.” Oops, okay. At a loss for another word, I replaced the jargon with the bland “combination of technologies.” In another discussion with another set of people, with this colleague’s comment in mind, I said, “I don’t want to use the word ‘convergence’ because it gives the impression that we are appropriating corporate lingo.” “Why not?,” quipped the person I was speaking with, a friend from Lesotho who works with the Lesotho Telecom. “I think we need to appropriate the word—that is part of educating the communities we work with,” she said.

What am I saying here? We need a common understanding of convergence before we proceed to discussing it. We need to be on the same page, so to speak.

According to Arnold Peter, et. al,¹ convergence occurs when various forms of media come together at a common distribution point. The common example they cite is the merging of technologies such as television and the Internet to create a single distribution channel, or vertically integrated content creators and content distributors. A concrete example is Walt Disney Corporation that produces a television programme for ABC, its own network. Another example is when ATM machines dish out ads for new reality TV shows while processing your transaction.

If we are to be limited by such examples, there is no doubt that the colleague who cautioned me about the use of the word “convergence” is correct. However, with the initiatives of community media practitioners in exploring ways of using both the new and the more established media, I would argue that convergence is not a monopoly of global media and ICT corporations.

A Meaningful Response

The basic aim of convergence from the global corporate media's point of view is to control the production and transmission of three communication products—audio, data and video. This means that both the new and the more established media are instrumental in further strengthening the global communication oligopoly. For example, the largest corporate merger in history (valued at over US\$165 billion) between the Internet giant America Online and media goliath Time-Warner in 2000 automatically meant AOL's assured access to the faster and better-quality cable television systems of Time Warner. In turn, Time Warner was assured access to AOL's 22 million subscribers, a captive market for the media products of its subsidiaries CNN, HBO and Warner Bros.²

This, of course, meant increased value for the companies' shareholders and executives. As many

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media analysts have already pointed out, this development was good for business, but bad for people who depend on the free flow of information to be able to participate in a democratic process of opinion-making. Indeed, what could be a better description than Robert McChesney's "Rich Media, Poor Democracy?"

A direct and meaningful response to the capitalist idea of convergence is the initiatives of community media practitioners. One such example is Radio Kothmale, a community radio in Sri Lanka that makes use of online content for broadcast. Because of the community radio station's Internet connection, the broadcasters are able to download information that they can use for their programmes. In Quezon province in the Philippines, a community-based radio station is part of a network that produces the online "Cyberdyaryo." This allows the radio broadcasters to contribute news materials to the online newspaper and use the other materials published in the same paper for broadcast. At the same time, they also take advantage of the cross promotion—the radio is promoted in "Cyberdyaryo," and "Cyberdyaryo" is promoted in the daily radio broadcast.

In 2002, we visited the site of the Nakaseke rural telecentre in Uganda to see how the women were using the CD Rom "Ideas for Making Money," a project of the International Women's Tribune Centre. In the course of our discussion, the village chief said, "We plan to set up a community radio here in the telecentre." When asked for the reason behind the plan, he cited the appropriateness of radio as a medium to a village with low literacy levels. Radio, he added, would help the villagers make their problems and situation known to others. This is the type of convergence that has the greatest potential, something that is coming from the people.

Guided by the principle of participatory communication, which Muthoni Wanyeki of FEMNET Africa defines as the two-way dialogues between civil society and the communities for effective interventions in national, regional and international decision making, the convergence of the new and the more established media has tremendous empowering potential. Moreover, if the initiative emanates from the community itself, as illustrated by the people from Nakaseke, convergence can become a potent

counterforce against the lack of diversity and therefore, a vital tool in promoting the plurality of views.

Convergence could also be effective in bridging the knowledge gap between the 'information haves' and 'have-nots.' If used in combination with radio, new media could reach massive numbers that it could not possibly reach in and by itself because of the prohibitive cost of hardware, software and computer connectivity, and of the basic infrastructure including electricity and telephony. Many villages in the Global South still do not have access to these basic services. But convergence will address the digital divide which, to begin with, is an extension of a longer and wider divide—that is, the gap between rich and the poor, between those with access to resources and those who don't.

Some Precautions

The potential of convergence does not automatically warrant the rapid adoption and diffusion of new ICTs. Rather, this potential should enhance the social value of the media that people have chosen or identified as relevant to their needs. As long as it is premised on the same principles that govern community media, convergence should bring about access, public participation in development, and one's space in decision-making.

In the same way that convergence will boost the effectiveness of the more established media such as print and radio by increasing the writers' or broadcasters' access to information and widening the distribution of their media products, the use of the new ICTs is also enhanced by convergence. Let's face it: Internet is primarily suitable for text-based information. Add to this its English bias, and we are talking of the alienation of millions of people from this medium.

The new technologies themselves present another world to conquer. The so-called "techno-phobia," while not comparable to the diagnostic phobias like claustrophobia or aerophobia, comes from valid reasons. First is the fear of 'breaking' the computer because it's an expensive machine. Another could be the fear of the unknown—what lurks behind the Internet? Still another is the fear of being branded stupid because everybody else has already learned it and she or he still can't figure it out. Therefore, in addition to basic reading and writing, one also has to

be equipped in the use of the computer before she or he can overcome fear of the new media.

The use of local content and local language is likewise important if one of the objectives of convergence is to ensure the continuous transmission of local and indigenous knowledge from generation to generation. This therefore means not only using online information for broadcast, but more important and more difficult, putting local content in local language online.

Women and Convergence

Women should be involved in innovating, developing and exploring models of convergence. As convergence requires much experimentation and innovation, women should take a front seat. Right now, the prospect of addressing women-specific questions in convergence seems vague—and this will stay so unless women themselves become active in this area. Their engagement in convergence should not be something dictated by 'technological determinism'³ but something that comes out of a felt need in combination with the opportunities presented to them or opportunities they made for themselves. ♪

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Footnotes

¹Peter, A., Lord, B., & Brook, 5 September 2003. A post-mortem on convergence. Retrieved 04 August 2004 from

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/pwc/talking_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1970119>.

² James, S. Reuters, 11 January 2000. Retrieved 4 August 2004 from <<http://www.agitprop.org.au/stopnato/20000113medireut.htm>>

³ Defined as a situation where media technology shapes how we as individuals in a society think, feel and act, and how society operates as we move from one technological age to another.

Honors: Communication Capstone Spring 2001 Theory Workbook. Retrieved 4 August 2004 from <<http://www.uky.edu/~drlane/capstone/mass/determinism.htm>>