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The benefits and challenges of converged Journalism in the Kenyan Media Industry

Kipkirui Kemboi Kap Telwa

Multimedia University of Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya

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Convergence journalism has been broadly defined as the integration of new technologies, telecommunications, computing and broadcasting into one system resulting in the merging of print, radio, television, photojournalism and online media. This new media platform has developed in the context of major changes in the media field, including declining newspaper readers, falling advertising revenue, shrinking news content and layoffs of journalists, alongside rapid changes in technology. The Internet, as a publishing platform for journalism, holds an added value on three levels: the journalist can choose to combine a variety of media forms to tell the story (multimediality), the audience can participate in the customization, the modification or even the creation of the content (interactivity), and, a story can be linked to other stories and media via a process of virtual collage to create a meaningful hypertext environment (hypertextuality). Making use of all three attributes (multimediality, interactivity and hypertextuality) converged journalism will be able to differentiate from the media logic of print, radio or television journalism. The purpose of this paper is to examine the benefits and challenges of mass media convergence within the Kenyan media industry.

Key words: Media Convergence Converged Journalism.

INTRODUCTION

There is no single and unanimously accepted definition of media convergence because writers have offered varied definitions. Pavlik (2004) defines media convergence as the coming together of computing, telecommunications and media in a digital environment, while Scholasticus, (2010) defines convergence as the process where several media channels come together to exist and operate in synergy or rather in harmony. The Merriam Webster online dictionary defines the word convergence as the merging of distinct technologies, industries, or devices into a unified whole. Lawson-Borders (2006) define convergence as an “ensemble of concurrent possibilities of cooperation between print and electronic media in the distribution of multimedia contents through use of the computer and internet”. It could also refer to online journalism, digital journalism, Internet Journalism, cyber journalism or web journalism (Kipkirui, 2010). That explanation agrees with (Noci and Palacios’s, 2007) definition of convergence as journalism on the digital networks, and specifically, on the internet.

From the foregoing definitions, convergence can be understood as the process of producing (gathering and organising), reporting and distributing news using the Internet and associated technologies. From this definition, internet and computers are the aggregating sources of contents generated by different media and distributed through different platforms.

Zhang, (2008) argues that media producers such as journalists are busy producing content for multiple media platforms, (Zhang, 2008) argues that rather than having different news people working for different medium platforms, convergence enables them to bring together “their operations and thus multiplying the number of platforms through which they distribute news simultaneously”. (Ketterer, 2004) adds that convergence uses the shared resources of newspaper and broadcast partners to provide more thorough coverage of major news events. The concept of ‘media convergence’ refers to a process of integration of traditionally separate modes of communication, affecting companies, technologies, professionals and audiences in all phases of the production, distribution, and consumption of any type (Zhang, 2008). It is from these definitions that converged journalism challenges are examined in this paper.

History of converged journalism

There are many different forms of converged journalism
but by far the most prevalent is the blog or the new social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter. Even though the definition varies, most people acknowledge that there are a few common traits that differentiate blogs from other websites. While many early Internet users will happily remind you that people in those days were just as prone to share their thoughts on current issues, the mailing lists, forum posts and other early attempts at mass communication were the equivalent of a small chat among friends whereas the Internet today is accessed by a large number of users and thus the audience for any potential information has grown exponentially (Wendland, 2002).

In Kenya, news no longer breaks through the traditional channels only: Reporter then news desk. Instead, bloggers, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter account holders are gaining more influence as news breakers and makers. Since mainstream media rely on new media content, news editors have created WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and blog accounts within flagship websites. Mbeki, (2010) says all the major media in Kenya have established internet services and disseminate news and current affairs through the internet. These media have websites where they engage in internet journalism and blogging. He further adds that a growing number of youth receive radio (and television) broadcasts through mobile phones, internet and MP3s.

**EMPIRICAL REVIEW**

According to Biagi, (1996), converged journalism started when media companies launched electronic delivery of news and newspapers to capture new audience seeking news in the 1990s. In essence, computers became storehouses and transmitters of vast amount of information that previously relied on written word. Cicely, (2009) says with the birth of online publishing, commentators on social sites entered the scene. He names John Barger who coined the term “web blog”, in January 1998, to describe his site Robotwisdom.com as the pioneer social commentators.

The following year, Peter Merholz, a web logger who shared his thoughts and journal entries at Peterme.com, looked for a way to shorten the term and ended up coining the phrase "blog" in the process. Blogs were made mainstream with the release of free software called Blogger, created by Pyra in San Francisco in late 1999. Google acquired Pyra and the Blogger software in 2003 while Steve Garfield released the first web in 2004. Since then, blogging has become part and parcel of online publishing. Studies have shown that an online journalist is empowered by the size of his or her audience. In fact, sites like Digg.com, twitter and facebook allow journalists to network and promote their works.

Many online journalists have created websites that give them huge profits from Google Ads, Adsense ads and internal revenue sources. Bloggers and readers are viewed as viable information gatherers. Many people take for granted that online news has always been around. Everyday, millions of people turn on their computers and type in the web address of their chosen news source. When they reach their destination, these individuals either read or listen to the news from anywhere around the world. Less than 20 years ago, the only forms of journalism that existed were local newspapers (Richard, 2009). Converged journalism has changed the media landscape. Not only has it given the general public unprecedented ability to conduct research, it has also enabled them to take the reigns themselves and report on current events through venues such as blogs. In fact, blogging is a huge part of the general media in terms of site visits. It took a lot of individual advancements for online journalism to become what it is today.

Porous, (2009) argues that search engines such as Google and the news industry are two worlds colliding, particularly with its launch of the 'Living Stories' prototype, which attempts to make content bedfellows of both entities - a story which in effect started almost eight years ago. In April 2002, Google launched a new beta service called Google News. It was a simple concept - a news aggregation service that trawled the web for news stories which it displayed in a 'News' tab within its search engine and as a new type of listing in the natural search results. By January 2006 the service had launched officially. By mid-2008 it was available in more than 40 regions and more than 19 languages. For the English language it covered 4,500 sources. The first objection from the press took place in March 2005 when Agence France-Presse (AFP) sued Google for $17.5m, alleging the search engine had violated its copyright by including AFP content on Google News without permission. This was resolved amicably in August 2007 with Google taking AFP content but not archiving it. That same year a Belgian court ruled that Google did not have the right to display the lead paragraphs of content within its news service.

In early 2009, Microsoft released Bing News, its first stable answer to Google news. Bing works in a practically identical way to the Google service. Later on, in 2009, managing director of News International Rupert Murdoch accused Google News of 'stealing all of our copyrights' and began having talks with Bing about Microsoft paying for News International's content. It was to be a move that potentially blocked the content from Google. On December 1, 2009, Google announced that Google News would begin to allow publishers to control how much of their content could be seen by Google News visitors before a pay wall was shown requiring the user to pay the publication for the content, typically via subscription. Luft (2008), while enumerating how to handle breaking news in the newsrooms warns thus: "It's about serving the customer, not serving the newspaper." He advises that when news breaks, editors should send out immediate
alerts: SMS, email, desktop messages. “After 10 minutes get 150 words on the website and solicit reader help with images/video or other accounts. Within an hour update story to 450 words and add additional images and video. Then look to commission analysis and opinion pieces, develop a topic page with multiple angles and multimedia.”

Kipkirui, (2010) quotes personal conversation with Nzioka (2010), then Standard Group senior editor, online: “Reporters and photographers viewed online as a give-away platform for their content. Unknown to them, online is a linked economy where search engines generate both revenue and traffic at the same time. It is advertising, publishing and archiving platform”.

Because this is the future of media and journalism, adoptions of innovations are on-going. In a study conducted in 2010, Synovate found that over 2 million Kenyans are registered users on Facebook, while 79% of Kenya’s Internet users are members of Facebook and that daily and weekly Internet usage in Kenya have both doubled in the last two years whereas monthly usage grew by over 80% in the same period. The fact that consumers are spending so much time online and that half of the internet users get online via their mobile phone will lead to a whole new chapter in marketing in Kenya. Media spending will change. Brands will demand a better Return on Investment (ROI). Advertisers who do not evolve to ride the digital wave will be rendered irrelevant (Palacios and Noci, 2007).

Types of Converged Journalism

Media convergence refers to a process of integration of traditionally separate modes of communication, affecting companies, professionals and audiences in all the phases of production, distribution and consumption of content of any type (Kembaro, 2010, Lawson-Borders, 2006), define convergence as “an ensemble of concurrent possibilities of cooperation between printed and electronic media in the distribution of multimedia contents through use of computer and the internet”. This definition has technological aspect. Technological convergence refers to the capacity of infrastructures to acquire process, transport and simultaneously present voice, data and video on a single network and integrated terminal. The new applications and services overlap and come together in the computer, telecommunication and audiovisual sectors. According to Gordon, (2003), this stage of technological convergence is necessary and obligatory for the evolution of the convergence process.

The second type of convergence is known as company convergence which facilitates the creation of alliances, temporary unions, fusions, takeovers or new companies. The third form occurs in the professional field. This form of convergence results in different strategies that make maximum use of news material, which then appears in different media. Such strategies range from forms of cooperation between newsrooms of different media to the creation of integrated multimedia newsrooms, where all messages are centralized, assignments are made and the flow of information is channelled to bring out printed, audio-visual and online versions of the contents. This requires the journalist to acquire competent skills in order to produce contents for several formats.

Many mobile phones are a good example of convergence and multi-functionality in that they increasingly incorporate digital cameras, mp3 players, camcorders, voice recorders, calculators, flashlights, and other devices. For the consumer, it means more features in less space; for media conglomerates it means remaining competitive.

The type of media convergence happening today is a fulfilment of what was predicted in the 1990s that a digital revolution would take place, and that old media would be pushed to one side by new media. For instance, broadcasting is increasingly being replaced by the Internet, enabling consumers all over the world the freedom to access to their preferred media content more easily and at a more available rate than ever before. Finally, convergence also affects the journalistic product, since it permits modification of both the formal characteristics of the contents, and audience habits in using and interacting with those habits. Media convergence environment is characterised by immediacy, multimodality, participation, depth, non-lineal structure and personalisation that its offers to users. Professional convergence requires journalist to cover story for television, radio and prepare version for both internet and printed media. This field views convergence as the use of resources on different platforms for joint work and information distribution in a coordinated way.

The Future of Converged Journalism

Converged journalism has progressed rapidly in recent years since the development and widespread use of the internet and World Wide Web. Technology changes rapidly, and thus the future of online journalism is exciting and virtually limitless. Much of the debate on the future of converged journalism focuses on whether it will replace traditional mediums or continue to complement them. (Boynton, 2000), suggests there will be further blurring between the mediums but that online journalism will supplement traditional mediums rather than replace them. The development of technology and multimedia will dictate the development of online journalism. However while efficiency and interactivity is bound to increase, the expansion of converged journalism may also lead to some problems (De Wolk, 2001). Potential problems include various ethical issues, along with the concern that an increase in online niche publications could create social divisions. Academics suggest the future of
Converged journalism will involve new gadgets and inventions that will be developed as technology improved (Boynton, 2000). One example is the possible development of an electronic newspaper that can download news from a computer or phone line. That information would then appear in a special grid between two sheets of plastic, where it could be viewed by the user. Others suggest the future of converged journalism relies more on a shift in thinking and journalistic culture rather than the progress and inventions of technology (Deuze, 2003). The altered format of converged journalism changes the focus of journalism from what it has been with traditional mediums. The new focus is connecting to content and other information through hyperlinks and multimedia rather than merely providing packaged individual content. This is a change from traditional media and will gradually determine the future of journalism as this shift in journalistic culture is further explored.

Another expected change to converged journalism is that the medium will become more and more personalised for individual users (Millison, 2004). One such way to make online journalism more personal is further incorporation of blogs. This would allow more interaction between readers and provide immediate commentary on news events and other issues (Froomkin, 2004, Zhang, 2008) argue that convergence has rapidly become as both a top-down corporate driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. He further quotes (Zhang, 2008 and Jenkins and Deuze, 2008), studies which opines that media and technological convergence are bringing forth many shifts such as participatory culture, user-generated content, connected communities of interest, destruction of the media industry hegemony, and fluidity across platforms. These shifts have created a plethora of ‘socialised media’ which include Social Networking, Facebook, OhmyNews, YouTube, Wikipedia, Flikr and MySpace among others. These ‘socialised media’ play the function of linking people to each other by encouraging various types of activity both commercial and social: connecting young people in the same network; helping users report and publish news stories and information on the line; encouraging audiences to broadcast themselves; facilitating people to share images; and allowing people to create their own profiles, view others’ profiles, blog, rank content, and so on (Zhang, 2008). He adds that these socialised media are becoming more and more popular so that the numbers of both the world users of user-generated content and the world user-generated

Figure 1: Convergence to Smartphones
content creators are increasing fast. There may be increased focus on monitoring web traffic to gauge the types of information web-users are seeking. This would make the medium more personal and audience specific, although it does have some privacy ramifications. On December 3, the Nation Media Group partnership with mobile telephone service provider Safaricom to provide its readers with e-paper. The readers will be required to purchase a ‘tablet’ from any Safaricom shop (Nation Reporter, 2013).

There are many different attitudes regarding the challenges of the future and the progress converged journalism will make. While the future is not completely clear, it is certain that the medium will continue to grow and prosper as technology improves and the medium is further understood and embraced. When Newsweek announced its plans to go digital, it was argued that the transition would entail job cuts among others. It also marked an indication of the shift to media consumption on digital devices such as tablets and mobile phones besides underscoring problems faced by newsweeklies in an increasingly commoditised, 24-hour news cycle (Daily Nation, October 21, 2012).

Characteristics of Converged Journalism

Converged and or online journalism has some similarities to the mediums of print, radio and television. It still involves the communicating of news and current affairs and it still retains the values of other forms of journalism. But the medium also has some unique differences. Characteristics specific to converged journalism include hypertext, interactivity and multimedia (Ward, 2002). Hyperlinks can be used to navigate through a news website and to connect the web-user to related content. This related content may be located in the web pages of the news site or elsewhere in the World Wide Web. This can supplement news stories and provide access to background material and other related information.

Use of multimedia is another vital element of online journalism. News stories published on the web can be complemented with graphics, photographs, animations, audio streams and video footage. Part of the reason such multimedia is available is due to the use of convergence, where sounds or images used in other mediums are repurposed for the online environment (Wendland, 2002), BBC Online is a good example of a news website employing multimedia obtained by repurposing content from BBC television and radio bulletins. Interactivity is another characteristic of converged journalism. There is a limited degree of interactivity in the other news mediums. Examples of this include ‘Letters to the editor’ in print media and ‘call-ins’ from listeners on radio and occasionally television. The online (or converged media) environment, however, is even more suited to interactivity and provides many opportunities for involving and communicating with web-users (Deuze, 2003).

There are three categories of interactivity in online journalism. Navigational interactivity allows the user to move through the sites to information of specific interest to them by clicking on relevant hyperlinks. Functional interactivity allows users to participate by interacting with other users and the news outlet journalists through discussion forums and email. Adaptive interactivity allows the customisation of the site to a specific user’s preference. It also enables users to influence the type of content on the website, as web traffic is monitored and the site is modified to reflect the audience interests (Deuze, 2003).

Other characteristics of converged journalism include archiving ability, immediacy and non-linear structure (Ward, 2002). News websites contain archived material which is easily stored in the virtually limitless environment of the World Wide Web. This is unique to converged news, as traditional mediums do not have the capability to provide readily accessible archived material.

Immediacy is a critical element of online journalism. Breaking news is available to audiences from the moment it is uploaded onto the news website. This can be done quickly and at any time allowing information to be up-to-date. The consumption of information in converged platform is non-linear. Web-users can select which stories they wish to read and may ignore the rest. This differs from television and radio broadcasts where all stories are presented and ordered according to the choices of newsroom executives (Huybrechts, 2007). The structure of online journalism is also non-linear. Information cannot merely be presented as a block of text where web-users must endlessly scroll down. Instead of this large block of writing, information is constructed into related components linked together. This enables web-users to view only the critical information or to access background information and subsidiary details.

Benefits of Converged Journalism

Converged journalism has both advantages and limitations. This is due to the many characteristics and issues specific to the medium. One of the most significant advantages is its immediacy. Prior to the development of online and converged journalism, radio was the most immediate medium, with news bulletins every thirty minutes or every hour. However the online environment allows for much greater immediacy. Journalists in this medium have the unique ability to publish news events as they happen. They can then update the stories to include subsequent information easily and speedily at any time of the day or night. As soon as the information is uploaded to the web, it is available around the globe (Kennedy, 2002).

Zhang (2008) argues that media producers- journalists-are busy producing content for multiple media platforms.
Colon, (2000) argues that rather than having different news people working for different medium platforms, convergence will see them “converging their operations and thus multiplying the number of platforms through which they distribute news simultaneously”.

Other advantages of converged journalism relate to other medium-specific characteristics. The incorporation of multimedia elements makes news websites more informative and entertaining. Hyperlinks, blogs and discussion forums allow web-users a more hands on experience, allowing them to be participants in the news process (Millison, 2004). The archiving ability of news websites is also a great advantage as it provides an extensive research resource to the public. Another advantage of converged journalism is that the medium is reflecting changes in society as well as technology. About one hundred million people access the World Wide Web (WWW) and the number is ever increasing (Landow, 1999). As online information can be accessed at any time it is a convenient way for people to stay up-to-date on local, national and world news. The greatest opportunity that converged journalism brings is the possibility of direct interactivity, which can be divided into three parts. First, reader can communicate with journalists directly, that is, now we are using ‘Journalism-as-conversation’, not ‘Journalism-as-lecture’. For instance, if you have a curiosity of a certain article, you can ask writer directly through e-mail or blog, furthermore, you can even report news or information promptly to let journalists write about it. Of course, journalists are also reacting to you and even asking you more information. In this situation, a journalist cannot be a commander (De Wolk, 2001).

Second, communication is occurring between readers. This is the very significant feature of converged journalism, which can be used as an ideal and effective “New Public Sphere” for achieving democracy. Citizens who have similar interest can meet each other and have a conversation together easily by using a bulletin-board, chatting, and community. In addition, they could meet in offline world, so called reality, and feel sympathy toward each other more strongly and finally, they could make public opinion and express it. It seems like the most similar form to the direct democracy in Greek or Rome (Lenhart et al., 2004)

In this process, various opinions about certain topics can be mentioned by public, and as a result, agenda setting, one of functions of journalism, is relatively weakened. We cannot satisfy yet, though, because the fact that it is easy to make public opinion in online doesn’t mean or guarantee that the public opinion will last long and affect offline world. This is one of assignment that we need to solve. The last form of interactive communication is between reader and information. It means readers can choose whatever they are interested in and read only that. That is, in online, news is provided by reader-oriented system like RSS (Really Simple Syndication). Email news alert is also based on the same logic. For example one selects business section in Google news alert service, and will be getting email alert only about business (Manovitch, 2007). After 79 years in print media, Newsweek did announce in 2012 that it would go digital. It utilised a blog post on its companion website The Daily Beast to make known its plan that would see it transition it into a digital-only format (Daily Nation October 21, 2012).

**Challenges of Converged Journalism**

Despite the numerous advantages of converged journalism, there are also limitations. The benefit of immediacy can give rise to some serious ethical issues. The desire to publish brand new information and the ease of which it can be altered may cause information to be made accessible before it is verified. This undermines the journalistic principle of accuracy and can lead to misinformation. As Zhang (2008), warns, the golden rule “Getting it first” should never outweigh “getting it right”. Another potential problem is the dilemma of breaking a news story immediately on the internet and therefore alerting rival news outlets, or waiting to break the news in another medium and have an exclusive story (De Wolk, 2001).

Other limitations are more general. The immense size of cyberspace and the extent of information available may intimidate audiences and cause information overload (Hall, 2001). Furthermore, it may be difficult for audiences to distinguish between credible news websites and other non-official news websites. This can lead to confusion and misinformation. There are also limitations in converged journalism regarding the issues of surveillance, censorship and privacy.

In online or converged media platform, people can research a specific article through portal site, which means news is arranged by readers' desire of getting information or personal concern. As a consequence, the role of gatekeeper is transferred from journalist to reader. The journalist is turned from gatekeeper to a gate watcher. News is no longer selected and arranged by journalist's personal news value and no longer consumed in one-way. Journalists have no power to convey their point-of-view about social issues to the public because now it is what public are doing. Positively, this phenomenon prevents information-distortion, since people can get raw information from reporter directly (Manovitch, 2001). OhMy News insists on its motto that “Every Citizen is a Reporter, and about 20% of its content is written by the 55-person staff while the majority of its articles are written by other freelance contributors are mostly ordinary citizens. The organisation attaches great importance to the quality of its journalism, information and other content and to the improvement of the user-content creators' ability of creating content (Zhang, 2008).
On the other hands, however, it means public take a responsibility of checking the credibility of information. Information provider just report what they heard and what they saw as soon as possible, and this kind of information should be checked deliberately by receiver because it is just a draft. The thing is some people are not able to filter and verify the truth. Thus, we need special agent for verifying the accuracy and credibility of information. Converged journalism is also a business, so it needs money to maintain. There are two basic types of competitive advantage: cost leadership and differentiation. This study will find out the competitive advantages media convergence will have.

Another thing needed for successful converged journalism is participation of public. To make people participate in sharing opinion, correcting mistakes, writing articles, reward is necessary, not just money, but also achievement, fame, fun in various form of reward. In this news website, arrangement of articles is decided by reader's voting, and recently they are paying to good journalist by letting reader transfer the money through online to the journalist who wrote valuable things. Online journalism brings huge impact on mass media. It has positive potentiality, but also has some problems to be solved.

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