



News Futures: Multi-Channel Journalism

Special Libraries Association

News Division

Baltimore, June 2006

Jane B. Singer, University of Iowa

<http://myweb.uiowa.edu/jsinger/sla2006/change.html>



Change and Challenge

The news profession and the news business are changing dramatically to accommodate a digital, networked, open media environment containing millions of free information sources.

Challenges include:

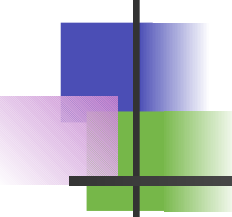
- Multi-platform storytelling (“convergence”).
- Participatory, “open-source” news.
- A desire for personalized information.
- Unprecedented competition.



Change and Challenge: Multi-Platform Storytelling

As media become digital, their forms intermingle. Text, photos, audio and video, for instance, are no longer distinct formats but merely different arrangements of bits.

Journalists must be able to communicate across formats (and able to determine which format is best for which story or which aspect of a story). Archived material also must be available and easily retrievable in multiple forms.



Change and Challenge: Participatory, “Open-Source” News

News producers are no longer distinguishable from news consumers. In an open-access, low-cost, networked environment, anyone can be a publisher.

Traditional news media become merely one source of information among millions. And each one of those millions is equally easy to access. Journalists no longer have privileged access to distribution channels.



Change and Challenge:

Desire for Personalized Information

Even when they are not seeking to generate their own information, people expect to be able to personalize the information that traditional news sources provide. They become “co-producers” of media content.

They also expect to be able to modify the format of that information, for instance by accessing it through a variety of devices. People get news in different ways at different times of the day.



Change and Challenge: Unprecedented Competition

There is unprecedented and intense competition for people's time and dollars.

Time available for media use is divided among unlimited information options.

So much info -- especially about current issues or events -- is freely available that charging for it either directly (by subscription) or indirectly (through advertising) is problematic.



Project for Excellence in Journalism: Major Economic Trends, 2006

The handout lists six trends identified by the PEJ in its 2006 “State of the News Media” report.

These are in addition to earlier trends:

- That the traditional model of journalism — the press as verifier — is giving way to other models that are faster, looser and cheaper.
- To adapt, journalism must move in the direction of making its work more transparent and more expert and widening the scope of its searchlight.
- Those who would manipulate the press and the public are gaining leverage over the journalists who cover them.
- Convergence is more inevitable and less threatening the more one looks at audience data.



Media Company Uncertainties

So the questions facing traditional media companies are profound. They include:

- What does a future for “mass” media look like (if there is one)?
- How can a viable brand succeed in this environment, one in which the zeitgeist includes distrust (at best) of “the media”?
- How will companies turn a profit?
- Where should current and future resources be allocated?



Media Company Uncertainties: Future of “Mass” Media

The notion of “mass” media may be outdated in an environment of narrowly segmented niche audiences -- even audiences of one.

Democracy demands a common knowledge base and a common ground for compromise and consensus-seeking. The news media have historically provided both. That has been their franchise, their legal safeguard under the First Amendment -- and a stable source of profit. Whether they can continue to maintain that role is far from guaranteed.



Media Company Uncertainties: Branding

Both national and local outlets have banked on their brand names as they have moved online. But there are signs that strategy may not continue to work. For instance, in 2005:

- Yahoo! News overtook MSNBC and CNN.com as the most-used online news site.
- Less than half of local online advertising dollars went to newspaper or television sites; most of the rest went to Internet companies such as google.com.



Media Company Uncertainties: Profitability

Online ad revenues for newspaper companies, in particular, rose dramatically in 2005. But they still account for only a small fraction of overall profitability because papers charge much less for online ads than for print ads -- no one knows how much that online ad is worth to those who see it. As for classified ads, one word: Craigslist.

How about user fees? Despite a variety of experiments, most visibly by *The NY Times*, only the *Wall Street Journal* and about 40 small dailies charge for access to their site.



Media Company Uncertainties: Resource Allocation

With technology, audiences and their business model all in a state of flux, it is difficult for companies to know where to allocate existing resources or in what areas to plan growth.

- Should they invest in infrastructure (physical or technological)?
- ... or in people (hiring new ones, or retraining and resocializing the ones they have)?
- ... or in new revenue streams such as e-commerce?
- ... or in new business relationships?
- ... or in -- what?



Newsroom Uncertainties

Life is equally uncertain in the newsroom, where journalists face:

- Shifts and/or cutbacks in staffing. Demands for cross-platform content creation require new skills, new attitudes and expanded output ... for the same old salary.
- Vastly expanded resources for news-gathering and research, without time or training to assess those resources.
- A general identity crisis: Who is a journalist today, and who will be one tomorrow?



Approaches

The good news is that media organizations are testing out a range of innovative approaches to handling the changes and challenges. We'll hear about some later this morning. Examples:

- New products in traditional formats, such as the *St. Pete Times'* *TBT* tab.
- Citizen journalism projects, such as mymissourian.com or backfence.com.
- Extensive use of blogs by journalists, such as those at the Greensboro (NC) *News-Record*.
- Multi-platform storytelling, such as what the journalists in Lawrence, KS, are doing.



Multi-platform journalism: More than “converging” skills

Yes, print journalists have to learn how to shoot video (and not look too weird on camera), and TV journalists have to learn where the commas go.

But converged newsrooms are about cultural change, which involves much harder things:

- Resocializing journalists.
- Reconceptualizing stories.
- Reorganizing work routines, habits and patterns.
- Rethinking perceptions about audiences and colleagues.



Multi-platform journalism: Resocializing journalists

Newspaper journalists, in particular, tend to think of themselves as ... newspaper journalists. Producing content for television and the Web as well as print forces them to revisit their self-perceptions and explore what it is they really do.

This resocialization process, in conjunction with other ongoing changes, leads to new definitions of who a journalist is and what such a person does. Shared normative concepts, particularly of public service, are foregrounded but their interpretation and implementation may vary across platforms.



Multi-platform journalism: Reconceptualizing stories

The news may be the news, but how it is conveyed varies with the medium in ways that go beyond adding video or a hyperlink.

Journalists are learning to think through what pieces they will need to gather, organize and present for different platforms. This is not easy; it takes time and planning. But there is some evidence that early “convergence” efforts, which mostly were about cross-platform promotion, may evolve into efforts to take advantage of each medium to convey different aspects of a story.



Multi-platform journalism: Reorganizing work

Working across platforms means adjusting to changes in work routines, habits and practices:

- Writing styles vary among TV, print and the Web.
- Beats are rare in TV and even rarer online.
- News happens. How long before the story appears? Tomorrow, maybe (print). By 5 p.m. (TV). How fast can you type (Web)?
- Information-gathering techniques vary. For instance, TV reporting generally requires the journalist to be on the scene ... not on the phone.
- “Hello, Newspaper Guild?” Most journalists are being asked to create stories for other media outlets in addition to -- not instead of -- stories for their “home” medium.



Multi-platform journalism: Rethinking perceptions

Effective “convergence” cannot be mandated by management (though some newsroom managers have tried). It has to be based on relationships developed through one-on-one communication among journalists in different media -- and the realization that they aren’t so different after all.

Nor are audiences unseen, unheard -- or unquestioning. They are active participants. This can seem like a curse, but it is best seen as a blessing, both because user-generated content is valuable ... and because it isn’t going away.



The future: It's online

Effective cross-platform journalism can ensure the survival of each medium ... but only if media companies commit the resources necessary to enable each one to do what it does best. The signs are not particularly promising.

In the meantime, the Internet is becoming central to Americans' news consumption and in the thinking of media organizations. The PEJ says, "The Web -- and a converged multimedia news environment -- seem more clearly than ever to be journalism's future." **Are you ready?**



Thank you for listening!

Now: **“It came from beyond the newsroom”**

- Mark Potts, co-founder and executive vice president, Backfence Inc.
- Andrew Haeg, senior producer and analyst, Minnesota Public Radio