

## **The Professional Identity of Journalists in the Context of Convergence Culture**

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### **Abstract**

Convergence is not just a buzzword, it is a key identifier of many different trends in today's digital culture. In this essay I explore the context and consequences of media convergence for a professional identity of journalists. Convergence in this context is not just a technological process, amplified through digitization. Media convergence must also be seen as having a cultural logic of its own, blurring the lines between different channels, forms and formats, between different parts of the media enterprise, between the acts of production and consumption, between making media and using media, and between active or passive spectatorship of mediated culture. Although many of these developments have been addressed in recent scholarship, little theorizing has taken place on the level of the work environment and professional context of journalists, reporters, and editors.

### **The Professional Identity of Journalists in the Context of Convergence Culture**

In today's digital culture, media work can be seen as a stomping ground for the forces of differentiated production and innovation processes, and the complex interaction and integration between work, life, and play, all of which get expressed in, and are facilitated by, the rapid development of new information and communication technologies. The new human condition, when seen through the lens of those in the forefront of changes in the way work and life are implicated in a participatory media culture, is convergent. This convergence is not just a technological process. Media convergence must also be seen as having a cultural logic of its own, blurring the lines between different channels, forms and formats, between different parts of the media enterprise, between the acts of production and consumption, between making media and using media, and between active or passive spectatorship of mediated culture.

In this essay I explore the context and consequences of media convergence for a professional identity of journalists. My understanding of convergence is based on the assumption that it contains two interdependent trends at the same time:

- the convergence of media industries, which in journalism means the establishment of multimedia newsrooms and integrated news companies;
- the convergence of media production and consumption, which in journalism refers to the increased use of the citizen-consumer as a source or co-creator of news reports, opinion and analysis.

Together, these trends are part of what Jenkins (1998) has coined as the emergence of a "convergence culture", increasingly determining the business policies and managerial processes within the creative industries (Deuze 2007).

### **Convergence Culture**

The ongoing merger of media enterprises as well as between media production and consumption signals the emergence of a global convergence culture, based on an increasingly participatory and interactive engagement between people and their media, within media as a business, as well as between professional and amateur media makers (Jenkins 2006). "Convergence is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other users. They are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture, to control the flow of media in their lives and to talk back to mass market content. Sometimes, these two forces reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding, relations between media producers and consumers" (Jenkins 2004: 37). For a holistic understanding of convergence culture it is therefore crucial to see the shift towards multimedia integration next to, and correlated with, the increased inclusion of the consumer in the production and product-innovation process of media companies.

Indeed, the significance of cross-media publishing while including a role for the customer as co-creator of the media message increasingly finds acceptance throughout the cultural industries. Among creatives and brand managers in ad agencies the contemporary focus is on interactive advertising, which can be defined as the paid and unpaid presentation and promotion of sponsored products, services and ideas involving mutual action between consumers and producers (Leckenby & Li 2000). Marketing communicators

brainstorm about the potential of “social”, “upstream” or “spherical” marketing (Svensson 2005), which refers to the strategic process of identifying and fulfilling consumer needs early in product development, up to and including customers and users at various stages in the total production and product innovation cycle. Convergence culture has been particularly part of the organization of work in the computer and video game industries. Game publishers often consider their consumers as co-developers (Jeppesen & Molin 2003), where product innovation and development largely depends on online consumer communities – such as for example in the modifying of games by players, which so-called “mods” are then integrated in new commercial versions of the original computer or video game and can extend the shelf-life of such games (Sotamaa 2005).

In journalism, editors of news publications actively consider adding what is called “citizen journalism” to their Websites, allowing members of the audience to respond, comment, and submit their own news in text, audio and video (Outing 2005). Of course, citizen journalism takes place on different levels, and efforts to implement user-generated content (UGC) at news organization come in many different shapes and sizes. Two fundamental issues tend to determine the scope and implementation of UGC in professional news organizations (see Deuze 2003):

- the balance between *content* and *connectivity*: to what extent is UGC considered to *add* to existing, professionally created content (as in: comments, feedback, interaction with editors/reporters, article ratings, such as the *Opinio* site operated by German newspaper *Rheinische Post*), or to function as producing original content next to the materials produced by the newsroom (as in offering citizens blogspace on the company website, such as at *Le Monde* in France or the *Mail & Guardian* in South Africa), and perhaps even in the place of the work of journalists (as in the case of *YouNews TV* in the United States for example);
- a balance between *open* and *closed* news systems: to what extent UGC gets moderated, filtered, edited or otherwise forced through a more or less traditional (that is: centralized and professionally controlled) gatekeeping process rather than what Bruns (2005) has called “gatewatching”, where journalists as gatewatchers fundamentally publicize news (by pointing to sources, including material offered by citizens) rather than publish it (by compiling a report from the available sources).

### **Multimedia News**

A structure of convergent multimedia news organizations has been emerging since the mid-1990s, with companies all over the world opting for at least some form of cross-media cooperation or synergy between

formerly separated staffers, newsrooms, and departments (Deuze 2005). According to a survey commissioned by the World Association of Newspapers (WAN) among 200 news executives worldwide in 2001, in almost three-quarters of these companies' integration strategies were planned or implemented at that time. Perhaps the pioneering example is U.S.-based Tampa Bay Online (TBO), a convergent news operation combining WFLA-TV (an NBC affiliate station), The Tampa Tribune, and a news website that provides original content plus material from print and television. The three media are housed in a special building called The News Center, where the different departments work together through a central multimedia newsdesk. After a couple of years of planning and development, in 2000 the reporters and editors of all the different media started moving in. Jane Stevens covered the transition for the *Online Journalism Review* and noted in 2002 that the gathering of breaking and daily news on all three platforms did not happen "without a lot of angst, complaints, missteps and aggravation. Some employees quit rather than change their way of doing journalism. Many more grumbled and went along. And a few rode the bull into the ring with equal parts fear and exhilaration."<sup>4</sup> The work at the Florida-based news organization is not completely integrated, but rather must be seen as an ongoing process of inter-firm collaborations. Michael Dupagne and Bruce Garrison (2006) for example note that the business and management operations of TBO remain separate, with staffs cooperating rather than working for a single converged organization.

After spending a week at the News Center in 2003, Jane Singer (2004) found that although they were not universally enthusiastic, most journalists at TBO perceived convergence as having a number of advantages relative to the long-standing system in which each news organization is independent and, in the case of the newspaper and television station, competitive. At a personal level, the journalists seemed to agree that the ability to work in more than one medium can be seen as a career booster or at least an useful addition to their resume. William Silcock and Susan Keith also spent some time interviewing journalists at TBO (in 2002), focusing on the problems and challenges of convergence for everyday newswork. One of the issues they found was the lack of a common language in which to discuss, negotiate and carry out more or less integrated news coverage. Instead, the journalists of the different media simply adopted a few words of each other's jargon, with print newswriters (of whom there are 300+ in the newsroom on any given day) feeling in particular that they had to learn more about their ten or so colleagues in television than vice versa. "As a result, having a TV journalist write for one of the newspapers usually was, with a few exceptions, considered a waste of resources. So there was little need for TV reporters to learn the lingo of print journalism. However, in cases where print offered a dominant action, print terminology prevailed [...] The few television reporters who did write for print also had to adopt print's style conventions" (2006, p.617).

All the researchers involved in studying and observing the ongoing operations at TBO and other similar convergence journalism ventures around the world note how the biggest obstacles to seamless integration always boil down to cultural clashes. This goes especially for the print reporters, citing their deep distrust of broadcast journalists' work routines, being skeptical about the quality of newswork if they are forced to do stand-ups for television or to write blurbs for the Web, and expressing a critical view on the quality and level of experience of their television and online counterparts. On the other side, television people reportedly feel their print colleagues to be conservative, slow, and oblivious to the wants and needs of their audiences (for instance as expressed through market research, sales figures and daily ratings). Killebrew (2004) even reports how news managers charged with implementing the convergence processes often seem unprepared, skeptical and ill prepared for the job. These kind of mutual stereotypes are not just the products of a stressful and confusing convergence experience, but are exponents of the historical separation of different professional identities and work cultures – which also suggests that interpersonal relationships and communication across the different media may resolve some of these clashes. Singer (2004) emphasizes that cultural compatibility problems are not permanent. A number of journalists at TBO told her that anticipated problems had either not materialized or vanished with seeing the quality or successes of the work of their colleagues, eventually gaining respect for journalists in other parts of the news organization as a result of convergence.

### **Participatory Journalism**

The rise of what has been described variously as public/civic/communitarian (Black, 1997), people's (Merrill *et al.*, 2001), open source (Deuze, 2001), participatory (Bowman and Willis, 2002) journalism, or (most generically) citizen journalism provides a new challenge to a news industry which in many developed nations faces significant permanent problems. Readership for newspapers and viewership of television news are declining, especially among younger generations (see for the U.S.: Mindich, 2005; for The Netherlands: Costera Meijer, 2006). The other market news companies serve – advertisers – are also retreating from the field of journalism, gradually shifting their attention to online or non-news channels. These long-term structural trends coincide with two co-determinant developments affecting journalists: a changing nature of work towards increasingly contingent, non-standard and otherwise "atypical" employment (IFJ, 2006); and a steady outsourcing of production work to "producers" (Bruns, 2005): the consumer-turned-producer or, as Rosen (2006) states, "the people formerly known as the audience."<sup>ii</sup>

Participatory news, citizen media, or what Jarvis (2006) defines as *networked* journalism “takes into account the collaborative nature of journalism now: professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, perspectives. It recognizes the complex relationships that will make news. And it focuses on the process more than the product.”<sup>iii</sup> In earlier work, *network* journalism has been defined as a convergence between the core competences and functions of journalists and the civic potential of online interactive communication (Bardoel & Deuze, 2001). Bardoel and Deuze predicted a new form of journalism that would embrace the previously mentioned cross-media functionality – publishing news across multiple media platforms – as well as an interactive relationship with audiences – acknowledging the lowered threshold for citizens to enter the public sphere. Ultimately, digital and networked journalism in whatever shape or form must be seen as a practice that is not exclusively tied to salaried work or professional institutions anymore. Or, as former Reuters editor-in-chief Geert Linnebank stated at a conference in March 2007: “Now everyone can be a reporter, commentator or a film director — the days of owning and controlling these processes are over.”<sup>iv</sup>

Participatory journalism is any kind of newswork at the hands of professionals and amateurs, of journalists and citizens, and of users and producers benchmarked by what Benkler calls commons-based peer production: “the networked environment makes possible a new modality of organizing production: radically decentralized, collaborative, and nonproprietary; based on sharing resources and outputs among widely distributed, loosely connected individuals who cooperate with each other without relying on either market signals or managerial commands” (2006: 60). Uricchio (2004: 86) describes the key to understanding the new media ecosystem as based on networked technologies that are P2P (‘peer-to-peer’) in organization and collaborative in principle. As such, an embrace of this networked environment by journalism challenges news organizations to extend the level of their direct engagement with audiences as participants in the processes of gathering, selecting, editing, producing, and communicating news.

Participatory journalism Websites initially appeared in direct response to what were perceived as significant shortcomings in mainstream news media coverage – this is true for the rise of *Indymedia* as a means of covering the protests surrounding the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, for the development of *OhmyNews* as an alternative to the highly conservative mainstream press in South Korea (Kahney, 2003), as well as for the myriad of news-related blogs in the wider blogosphere. Recent years have seen a further fine-tuning of the various models under which such sites are produced, employing various degrees of balance between enabling the open and direct participation of citizen journalist

contributors in publicizing and discussing the news, and some level of editorial oversight by the operators or communities of participatory journalism sites (Deuze, Neuberger & Paulussen 2007). As argued earlier, there are significant differences in approach between the various participatory news formats currently in operation. In spite of the involvement of citizens as contributors, most news organizations retain a degree of conventional editorial control over what is eventually published, while others publish all submitted content immediately, or allow registered users to vote on what passes through the publication's gates; similarly, some sites harness their communities as content contributors mainly at the response and discussion stage, while others rely more immediately on users as contributors of original stories.

In online journalism as it is produced by professional/commercial news organizations, initiatives to implement interactive features are increasing – but journalists find it difficult to navigate the challenges this brings to established notions of professional identity and gatekeeping (Chung, 2007). Additionally, although people may express a general preference for more interactivity on news Websites, when confronted with increasingly elaborate interactive options users seem confused, and indeed are less likely to be able to effectively digest or follow the news on offer (Bucy, 2004). It must be clear, then, that a more interactive, dialogical or participatory style of newswork is currently very much 'under construction'; that it occurs in its most advanced forms on Net-native and generally non-mainstream online platforms; and that more or less traditional makers and users of news are cautiously embracing its potential – which embrace is not without problems both for the producers and consumers involved.

Convergence culture-based participatory news sites tend to emerge from institutions and organizations with a strong public service agenda or a strong connection to clearly defined local or interest communities, or are set up by commercial news organizations which see a thorough embrace of participatory journalism models as a clear competitive advantage in a shrinking market for journalistic work. Examples of such sites may include *NowPublic*, which acts as a platform for the aggregation and discussion of international news reports, the hub of *Backfence* communities in the United States serving as a DIY ("Do-It-Yourself") platform of local news, the British *BBC Action Network*, where local communities are encouraged to submit and discuss information of public interest under the banner – within the brand – of the nation's public broadcaster, or the Dutch site *Headlines*, sponsored by public broadcast news organization NOS, inviting especially younger people to contribute to the news by uploading their own written, audio or video reports. In each instance a professional media organization (top down) partners with or deliberately taps into the emerging participatory media culture online (bottom up) in order to produce some kind of co-creative, commons-based news platform.

### **Professional Identity and Convergence Culture**

The literature on the factors of influence on media production consistently suggests journalists are both 'steered' by changing external factors, as well as 'guided' by their own individual, personal particularities (see comprehensive overviews in: Berkowitz, 1997; Weaver, 1998: 455-480; Tumber, 1999; Loeffelholz, 2000). Most authors maintain that the interplay between media organizational and actor variables most powerfully explains the behavior of professional journalists. Yet surveys among journalists in different countries suggest reporters and editors tend to be pluralistic in their self-perceptions, as most journalists see themselves as serving seemingly contradictory functions in society (Deuze, 2002). As journalists can be seen as both actors guided by discursive structural factors – society, economy, culture, media system and history – and influenced by personal characteristics (or: subjectivities) – background, upbringing, commitment, involvement, gender, ethnicity, age – the way to analyze the impact of the developments sketched in this essay should take into account the apparent tensions between these principles. One should therefore stress the continuous negotiation between individual and collective level variables as shaping the behavior of "the people behind the keyboards", as Van Zoonen puts it (1998: 123). Although Weischenberg for example also acknowledges the relative autonomy of individual newswriters, he argues that their actions are to a certain extent shaped by media systemic, organizational and production variables (Weischenberg, 1995: 69). Others have argued that all influences from 'the outside' on journalists and mass media decision-making are predominantly moderated by self-organization and self-referential processes within journalism (Marcinowski, 1993; Huber, 1998: 49). The key to understanding this tension between individual and collective-level interpretations in a context of disruptive and technology-driven change, is to look at recent trends in journalism regarding labor relationships.

The production arrangements and management of creativity in the news industry is facilitated by technology. Yet technology is not an independent factor influencing the work of journalists from the outside, but must be seen in terms of its implementation, and therefore how it extends and amplifies previous ways of doing things. "The new technologies make possible changes in news production and news outputs, but there is no reason to expect that the impact of the new technologies will be uniform across all news providers. Rather we might expect to find that there are differing impacts, contingent upon different technological applications which in turn are contingent upon the goals and judgments of executive personnel and any political regulators" (Ursell 2001, p.178). I would like to extend Ursell's argument to include any and all workplace actors into the process of adopting and adapting to (the consequences of)

new technologies – including those who do not work physically in the newsroom and who are quickly becoming the majority in the field of newswork: freelancers, stringers, correspondents, and other non-permanently employed journalists. In an April 2006 survey on the changing nature of work in the news media in 38 countries, the International Federation of Journalists for example concludes that these 'atypical' media workers make up around 30% of the membership of IFJ affiliates, and are especially to be found among the younger, female and ethnic minority colleagues in the industry.<sup>v</sup> Journalists are thus increasingly forced to give meaning to their work and thus construct their own professional identity in the context of rapidly changing and often overlapping work contexts. The impact of convergence culture on the professional identity of journalists therefore should emphasize the continuous negotiation processes going on regarding the individual media actor – a negotiation between the dynamics of the journalist as a person and as a professional, each of which functions with its own characteristics, conditions, perceptions and (thus) factors of influence on news decision-making and media production. In this respect Van Zoonen (1998) and others tend to refer to issues of "organizational identity" in journalism, which refers to the agency of journalists as shaped by the constant interplay between structural constraints of the media production process on the one hand, and the influence of a wide array of subjective personal aspects that journalists bring to the job. Beam (1990) has argued that the process of professionalism in journalism can be defined by looking at the identity of journalists as an organizational-level concept; as in the success of journalists in gaining control over the products and production processes within their organization.

The rich literature on social identity, organizational identity and corporate identity in companies tends to draw distinctions between different levels of analysis: the "individual (relating to people's personal sense of self within the organization), group (relating to the shared identity of teams and sections within an organization), organizational (relating to the identity of the organization as a whole) and cultural (relating to commonalities in identity across organizations and within a society as a whole)" (Cornelissen, Haslam & Balmer 2007: S2-3). However, a more singular view of professional identity is warranted when assessing contemporary changes and challenges to media work in general and journalism in particular, since it does not assume that a professional is necessarily situated within a given medium-specific organizational context. Such an assumption is hard to maintain in the current context where journalists can be seen as having multiple organizational identities – through working for different realms within one or more organization(s), windowing content cross-media, freelancing or producing content independent from organizational constructs for example as bloggers or copywriters, and not in the least by competing for editorial space with consumers as co-creators of (news) content.

Convergence culture particularly impacts on both sides – structure and subjectivity - of the professional identity of journalists. Elements of structure are: the status and protection (by law) of the profession, ethical guidelines of one's organization (if any), budgets, preferred sources (every news organization has its own range of experts), market characteristics, set routines and rituals on the workflow, ownership, and so on. Subjectivities are those things that an individual journalist brings to the job: socio-demographic background, motivation and commitment, family situation, lifecycle, political views, role models, et cetera (see Deuze, 2002: 41-3). In terms of subjectivities, convergence culture adds a new type of media worker to the agency equation: the "producer" (Bruno 2005). This is someone with whom professionals now have to compete with for a chance to create content, and to get the attention of consumers, competitor-colleagues, and advertisers. As the producer is generally someone who does not get paid, and he or she contributes unpredictably (and often using anonymous aliases or avatars), this new entry into the media production sphere is both ubiquitous as well as imperceptible. On the structural side, convergence culture introduces a constantly changing mix of features, contexts, processes and ideas into the work of individual newsmen as their employers, organizations and newsrooms get reshuffled under the managerial impetus of integration and expectation of synergy. This, in combination with changes in (international) media law – making it easier for transnational corporations to own, sell, or integrate their holdings while still controlling all copyrights and intellectual property – and a gradual erosion of union or trade association membership and protection, certainly amplifies the precariousness of media work today (Deuze 2007).

## **Discussion**

The key to understanding the currently evolving and to some extent emergent system of converged and participatory journalism is to see its function as a corrective to traditional or otherwise entrenched notions of what it means to be a journalist. The promises and challenges of a more participatory news gathering and distribution system cannot be understood without factoring the industry side of the equation: the tendency of institutions to adapt to innovation and change in ways to primarily reproduce that what came before, and the dominant managerial reply to (real or perceived) economic decline: redistributing risk away from the company (to the employee) and increasing the cost-effectiveness of production away from labor (to the audience, or "prosumer"). Furthermore, convergence culture and media participation operate in a broader social context of a shift from expert intelligence to collective intelligence (Levy 1997), from solid modernity to liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), and from national/ethnic/religious essentialism to a post-national constellation – all of which transitions are grounded in an increasing impotence of people in their identities as citizens, consumers and workers "to shape their own social environment and [to] develop the

capacity for action necessary for such interventions to succeed” (Habermas, 2001: 60). Admittedly, these are generalistic observations that need much more elaboration and detail to be explored effectively. However, such thematic considerations are introduced here to point towards a crucial conclusion: the changes underway in the social, technological and cultural domains of everyday life are beyond anyone’s distinct control, yet affect each and everyone of us distinctly. In this context, the fundamental role of professional journalism as providing society with some form of social cement, guidance and benchmarks is essential. Overseeing the currently available scholarly evidence on the implications of convergence and participation for the work that reporters and editors do, one could state conclusively that for different reasons their professional autonomy gets significantly undermined. What remains unclear, is how increased collaboration with citizen-consumers, or integration with competitor-colleagues can indeed lead to higher quality journalism. Of course, idealistically, cross-media production and crowdsourcing offer tremendous opportunities for comprehensive and multi-perspectival reporting. Yet, realistically, this is not what tends to happen. Media professionals are more likely to respond nostalgically and defensively to disruptive change, media management tend to interpret such changes primarily in terms of their potential to ‘depopulate’ the profession, and audiences seem to embrace these developments more as a way to bypass and disintermediate journalism altogether rather than as a mechanism to foster closer ties.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> See URL: <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/workplace/1017859157.php>.

<sup>ii</sup> Jay Rosen coined this term in a post to his PressThink weblog on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006; see URL: [http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr.html](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html).

<sup>iii</sup> Quote from the influential Buzzmachine weblog of Jeff Jarvis on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006; see URL: <http://www.buzzmachine.com/2006/07/05/networked-journalism>.

<sup>iv</sup> Patrick Smith (22 March 2007), Linnebank: 'Old media' must re-evaluate role, in: *Press Gazette* UK; URL: [http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/article/220307/geert\\_linnebank\\_changing\\_media\\_summit\\_newspapers](http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/article/220307/geert_linnebank_changing_media_summit_newspapers).

<sup>v</sup> Report available at URL: <http://www.ifj.org/pdfs/ILOReport070606.pdf>.