

Converged conversations: A case study of journalism and digital commentary in the public sphere

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Abstract

This exploratory study examined a news episode in a single market as a case study aimed at teasing out elements associated with journalism and audience convergence. This study found four conditions present when the audience converged. The conditions were a spark, or ignition event, that has the potential to arouse dialogue, journalism that makes the broader public aware of such an event, a sufficient mass of audience commentary to create debate, and a channel through which the debate can occur. This process represents a convergence of different public spheres, where audiences overlap and interact across platforms, taking with them bits and pieces from other public spheres to create a new one, a converged conversation. Further, this study found that audience convergence stayed within the confines of the journalism channels that offered initial coverage of the event, suggesting journalism as a key element in the creation of such a space, but, once created, journalism is no longer the curator.

Keywords

Audience convergence, convergence, digital news, journalism, public sphere

Introduction

Past and current cross-country runners for Chardon High School (Ohio, USA) gathered on a frosty New Year's Eve 2011 at the high school track field to take the Eggnog Challenge, an odd contest in which the athletes drank a cup of a nonalcoholic version of the holiday treat, ran, drank again, and then ran more. The winner was the last to vomit. Assistant Coach Mary Pat Martin captured the event on camera and produced a 16-minute video, which she posted to YouTube and provided a link from her Facebook page. Six days later, an aunt of one of the runners, a woman from Findlay,

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about 150 miles from Chardon, sent Martin's Facebook post to WKYC television station in Cleveland and Chardon school's Superintendent Joe Bergant (Beres, 2012). The resulting report touched off a digital firestorm of commentary, throwing into stark relief a number of issues associated with an audience encountering the forces of journalism through technology and each other.

Participants in the event, journalists, stakeholders in the Chardon community, and those living outside the community but interested in the issue collided in an unfettered and relatively unmediated digital environment to compete over meaning. Was the so-called nog jog a noxious hazing? Or, was it a bit of fun, routine to the running culture? Or, was the whole thing manufactured by technology and journalism that allowed the episode to be so publicly visible?

This examination sought to use the nog jog episode as a case study to examine issues associated with convergence in the news industry and increased audience participation. There were the following three primary levers into this exploratory study: what roles, if any, does journalism play in the audience dialogue; does the originating medium matter; and how and whether is the audience using content provided by one journalism outlet to inform its conversation on another? These questions were formed as way of attempting to gain insight into the functioning of the public sphere within the context of convergence. The result is a step toward theorizing audience convergence as an adjunct to the concepts of traditional media convergence and the public sphere as a space where society negotiates narrative and meaning (Ananny and Kreiss, 2011; Van Leuven et al., 2014).

Scholars and practitioners have cited technology as enabling a widening of both news coverage and audience, with news outlets increasingly using their Web sites, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube services to reach more people faster (Van Dijck, 2012). In addition, such technology has opened the journalism process to the audience, allowing it to take part in crafting the news to a degree never before seen (Thurman, 2011), resulting in – at least potentially – a more vibrant public sphere essential to the workings of representative democracy (Donsbach, 2014).

The episode at Chardon High School was identified as part of a broader examination. I first identified all news outlets – broadcast, print, and Web start-up – that were either based in or reached into Geauga County, Ohio, where Chardon is the county seat. Once identified, audience interaction was tracked and examined through the prisms of the theory of the public sphere and the concept of convergence. The goal was to test the idea of the audience using multiple platforms to gather, interpret, and create narrative within the context of a news event.

Theoretical grounding

Theories of the public sphere and convergence underpin this study. Jürgen Habermas (1989 [1962]), in critiquing the political situation in post-World War II Germany, built on the concept of citizen involvement in public affairs with his articulation of the public sphere. He concluded that in order to exist, a true public sphere must have several elements present, for example, a public space in which citizens may engage, topics of discussion that must be of general interest to all (or nearly all) citizens, an opportunity for feedback, and – above all, in Habermas's view, rational discourse that ultimately seeks consensus toward meaning. The public sphere is the mechanism by which public opinion is formed and changed and by which the public influences the direction of policy through mediated agreement, or at least acknowledgment and eventual acquiescence, of definitions and outcomes, which are then carried out by political actors dependent on the public will, the latter articulated by Habermas (1984) as 'communicative action'. Habermas' ideas have been evoked in

scholarship from everything on a study of bumper stickers in an Israeli election (Bloch, 2006) to discourse on the Jerry Springer show (Lunt and Stenner, 2005).

A variety of criticisms have developed around the idea of the public sphere, most attacking Habermas' overly optimistic view of the sphere and his explication of how it *should* work, not necessarily how it *really* works. Many scholars, as in critiques of the First Amendment, have pointed out that Habermas's theory demands equal access to a debate of political equals. As political theorist Iris Young (2002) notes, this is an impossible situation. A society built on the ideals of free markets and individual merit, both in theory and in practice, must necessarily provide more freedom for some than for others. For instance, scholars Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Hernan Galperin (2000) have argued for governmental regulation of the American newspaper based on Habermas' ideas of equal access to public debate. They note that the newspaper owner has no legal requirement to permit voices into her publication other than those with which she agrees. The result, they contend, is a stunted debate without real alternatives. Media scholar James Curran (1997) issued a particularly withering critique of Habermas' prescriptive ideas, arguing he failed to take into account how power moves through institutions and societies, particularly what he termed the apparent collusion between government and industrial interests. Habermas later acknowledged the shortcomings of the metaphor, but he has continued to argue in favor of the structural and theoretical elements of the public sphere as the preferred arena for determining meaning (Habermas and Derrida, 2003).

Audience convergence

Early in the digital evolution of the news media, much attention was given to the idea of convergence as a way of looking at legacy (or traditional) media forming partnerships to deliver content across multiple technological platforms, such as newspapers teaming up with television stations to share stories (Brin and Soderlund, 2010; Duhe et al., 2004). As economic pressures mounted on both broadcast and newspaper companies, such partnerships have waned in favor of individual outlets using the web to deliver multiple types of content, such as videos, photos, and written stories (Avilés and Carvajal, 2008; Kraeplin and Batsell, 2013). Indeed, Collins and Brown (2012) found that rather than convergence ideas driving media outlets together, competition for digital space and audience appears to have spurred many outlets to ramp-up Web operations without partnerships. This has occurred even while some – mainly newspapers – continue to hold onto traditional delivery and reporting methods. MacGregor (2014) found that some outlets have reversed early convergence strategies as hoped-for economic results failed to materialize, while García-Avilés et al. (2014) reported that many media companies are using technology to present content across various platforms as a profit strategy, with the goal of using participation as an enticement to increase audience size. In an early example of the potential difficulties of convergence, a survey of news editors and producers found many professionals concerned with how staff skills would be updated to produce digital content and how the content would be perceived in the marketplace (Huang et al., 2006).

Jenkins (2008) moved beyond technological and economic convergence to the idea of the audience melding conversation and thought in what he called the convergence culture. Jenkins focused on 'the power of media producer and the power of the media consumer (to) interact in unpredictable ways' (Jenkins, 2008: 2). Others, while nodding toward Jenkins' ideas, have suggested that elements of the originating mediums, though most concentrating on popular culture rather than news *per se*, remain as information streams and audiences converge (Herkman, 2012; Jun and Helin, 2012; Owczarski, 2012; Szécsi, 2013).

Several studies have looked at the phenomena of audience engagement and interaction through digital spaces created by television, though none could be identified involving traditional news. For instance, Steemers (2004) critically examined the British Broadcasting Corporation's attempt to use digital technology to create a 'cultural commons' that brought disparate audience members together. Carpentier (2011) suggested further examination is needed of 'author-audience' convergence, a concept that centers on how the audience affects content. Other scholars have studied the concepts of 'active audiences' (Fuente-Cobo et al., 2014; Sundet and Ytreberg, 2009) and 'social audiences' (Quintas-Froufe and Gonzalez-Neira, 2014). Both of the latter concepts focus on the ongoing movement away from a system of delivering products, news, and entertainment to one centered on creating interaction and conversation.

In an intriguing examination of the public sphere and audience participation in television, Fish (2013) used various theories to critically examine Current TV's use of the digital space for audience participation. He argued audience participation is different from content creation by differentiating between 'amateurs having the competencies or access to engage with otherwise closed sociotechnical systems' (Fish, 2013: 374) and professionals with the time, expertise, and tools to manufacture content. This study relies on that definition, examining the interplay between what is posted to local news Web sites by professional journalists and the audience. However, this study sought to further parse the audience by examining the roles various individual audience members played in online dialogue by borrowing concepts from studies that compared audience contributions to digital platforms. For instance, Whiteman (2009) examined commentary on two separate Web sites to explore fan identification and negotiation by identifying themes in the content. This study, however, does not examine two separate platforms but rather seeks to find the interplay between platforms.

As such, this case study uses the concept of convergent culture (Jenkins, 2008), which suggests that information is not necessarily trapped within the confines of the platform in which it was presented. The audience, or consumer, carries the information as they travel from one stream to another. This is an important area of study. The Pew Research Journalism Project (Holcomb et al., 2013) reported, for instance, that nearly two-thirds of US news consumers who used social media to acquire the majority of their news visited multiple sites to do so. Further, the majority of US news consumers get their news from multiple digital platforms, with the average ranging from visiting two to six Web sites (Pew, 2013). While simultaneous media use has gained some attention (Mark et al., 2009), less has been paid to the processes behind the flow of information from one platform to another. Hassoun (2014), in fact, argues that too little research has been done in what the audience actually does with multiple streams of information gathered.

While research is sparse on the audience using multiple digital platforms to contribute to public conversation, audience contributions through news channels as a way of crafting narrative is not new. Letters to newspaper editors, for instance, have been studied as a way of gauging the public sphere (Thornton, 2011, 2014). So-called talk back radio, too, has been studied (Berland, 1990; Boggs and Dirmann, 1999). For instance, Ewart (2014) found that some listeners to talk radio in Australia felt ethical imperatives to provide factual information to ongoing discussions on local social issues in ways similar to journalism.

Audience and narrative within the context of news long have been defined as storytelling for a purpose, with various factions competing for frames and meaning (Gitlin, 1980). For the purposes of this study, the identification of specific themes was important only to determine the process used by the audience in reaction to the journalism it sees. No attempt was made to determine meaning or critically assess the coverage. Digital platforms have changed the dynamic of the traditional

process by allowing audience members to not only react to what is presented but to contribute to story lines by adding their own information and perspectives. For instance, Harlow (2013) found a connection between traditional news stories and memes posted to Facebook during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2010.

The market and community

Geauga County, Ohio, is only slightly wealthier on a per capita basis than the national average and has a population of 98,143 (U.S. Census, 2012). Four network television stations, all based in Cleveland and all network affiliates of Fox, NBC, ABC, and CBS, were found that included Geauga County in their core designated market areas (DMAs). In addition to the television stations, five print operations were identified for this study, including the metro daily *The Plain Dealer*, based in Cleveland but which has 30% penetration (defined as the number of households divided by the number of papers sold) in Geauga County, and a regional daily, the chain-owned *News-Herald*, which is based in contiguous Lake County and offers coverage for some portions of Geauga County. Three print weeklies, two based in Geauga County, were identified. These include the *Geauga Maple Leaf* and the *Geauga Times-Courier*. The third, the *West Geauga Sun-News*, is owned and run by the *Plain Dealer* as part of a chain of suburban weeklies. In addition, a sole Web start-up was identified, www.geauganews.com. All news outlets were examined for partnership agreements. None were noted.

All outlets were examined for Web sites, and all had at least rudimentary digital offerings. *The Plain Dealer*, for instance, has a robust site that is routinely updated and offers several different forums for audience interaction. All the television stations in the market offer at least Web versions of their newscasts, and all offer the ability for the audience to comment. The weeklies differ widely in their digital offerings. The *Geauga Maple Leaf*, for instance, has a deep Web site, but has a pay wall while the *Sun-News* offers only headlines from the previous print edition.

Research questions

By connecting the theory of the public sphere, convergence concepts, and ongoing research on digital commentary associated with journalism, the following research questions were developed. The questions were developed in two broad categories: What the journalism presented to the audience, and how – and whether – the audience reacted to that journalism.

The journalism:

- RQ1:** What themes could be identified in the journalism presented to the audience?
- RQ2:** What sources were used in the coverage in support of the themes presented?

The audience:

- RQ3:** Were factors present that would indicate the originating medium, newspaper or television, had an effect on the audience dialogue taking place in digital spaces?
- RQ4:** How did the audience react, or not react, to coverage themes and sourcing?
- RQ5:** What audience contributions could be identified on the various Web sites?
- RQ6:** What evidence, if any, of audience convergence could be found?

Method

Case studies can be broken in a variety of categories, though all share the same basic goal: teasing larger themes and ideas from specific, narrow episodes (Eisenhardt, 2002). George and Bennett (2004) note the difference between cross-case analysis, in which two or more episodes are examined for comparison, and within-case analysis, in which a single episode is explored. This study is a within-case examination and as such seeks to parse broader themes from specifics found within a single event. Case studies, though narrow in terms of data, can be highly useful in theory development by allowing researchers to see through the often complex haze of large data and concentrate on specifics that illuminate the larger issues (Eisenhardt, 2002).

All news-oriented outlets that included Geauga County in their stated DMAs were examined for coverage of the so-called nog jog event, audience commentary associated with the coverage, and commentary that may have been posted to forums such as those offered by *The Plain Dealer* that are independent of specific news coverage. This was done by searching the sites for key words, including 'Chardon', 'Gauga County', 'nog jog', 'egg nog', and 'egg nog run' as well as the names of individuals associated with the event. The search was confined to the day the first coverage appeared on WKYC to 14 consecutive days after the coverage. This time frame was selected to include the initial reporting and the announcement of a resolution by the school district involving the incident.

This search resulted in four initial news items on four sites. The stories were collected from the sites and pasted into a single digital file, with notes indicating the outlet and day and time of the posting. The accompanying search for commentary revealed 192 comments on three sites, www.wkyc.com, www.news-herald.com, and www.fox8.com. Of those, only a single comment was posted to www.fox8.com. Since no dialogue was present, this comment was no longer considered. The remaining 191 comments were centered on two sites, www.wkyc.com and www.news-herald.com. The comments were collected into a single digital file and sorted by outlet and time.

Each set of data, the comments, and the stories were then analyzed using textual analysis. Fürsich (2009) suggests textual analysis in the context of media texts 'present a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding that justifies special scholarly engagement' (p. 238). Papacharissi (2004), Sotillo and Starace-Nastasi (1999), and Vultee (2012), all conducted textual analysis by breaking content into general themes. Vultee (2012) collected comments on foxnews.com as he searched for and categorized fantasy themes associated with the Tea Party Movement. He stored the comments in electronic files and analyzed them individually as illustrative of overall themes. The author adopted his method for collecting data. Witschge (2008 p. 78) noted:

It is important to realize that discourse is not constructed in a vacuum: in addition to the text, there is the environment in which the text is produced and consumed as well as the wider social practice to which it belongs.

For this study, the comments were examined for themes that related to how the audience used the information contained in the coverage, whether the commenter brought new information into the narrative, whether the commenter self-identified as being self-interested in the event through being there, a community supporter, a running enthusiast or other connection, and whether the commenter brought in information to the dialogue from outlets other than the

one being used for the conversation. For instance, if a poster on WKYC.com mentioned information from *The News-Herald* that was logged as bringing in information from another news source. These themes were chosen after an initial examination. The goal was to identify audience reaction to frames and narrative, rather than to critically assess those frames (Entman, 1989). By parsing out the frames, it became possible to examine comments associated with those frames. The coverage was examined for broad themes that suggested the dominant frame of the story (Chong and Druckman, 2007). After an initial examination, the coverage was found to have fallen into three broad frames, namely, scandal, an unhealthy activity, or an event reported by other outlets. The themes suggested the overall narrative of each story (Knobloch et al., 2004).

Results

In regard to RQ1 and RQ2, themes and sources in the coverage, an analysis showed each outlet contained a different prominent theme and widely divergent sourcing. WKYC aired a 3-min, 26-s spot on January 7, 2012, introducing the piece as an 'exclusive' with the tagline 'sick workout'. Reporter Tom Beres did a live shot from the darkened gazebo in the Chardon Courthouse Square. In his report, Beres (2012) had sound from Chardon Superintendent Bergant saying he was 'appalled' that one of his employees was 'encouraging this activity'. Beres compared the so-called jog to college hazing. The report, which did not include parents, runners, or coaches, was posted to the station's Web site after the 6 p.m. newscast.

In addition to WKYC, three other outlets in the market offered some coverage, *The News-Herald*, *The Plain Dealer*, and FOX8 television (WJW). *The News-Herald* did the most extensive reporting on the incident while noting that WKYC had initially reported the episode. The newspaper, however, quoted unnamed parents and an anonymous runner who claimed to have taken part in the incident. The story framed the incident as a personnel matter, with the assistant coach coming under investigation by the school district, while also reporting the mild controversy associated with similar events around the country. *The Plain Dealer* and FOX8 had different takes than either WKYC or *The News-Herald*. FOX8 did a story two nights after the WKYC report, without mentioning its rival station and framing the story as a common, but unhealthy, practice for runners across the country (Laforce, 2012). *The Plain Dealer* only mentioned the story in its daily media blog, a compendium of what other outlets in the market were reporting, noting that both WKYC and the *News-Herald* had posted stories on the event and provided links to both of them (Zicari, 2012). The news outlet closest to the community, the weekly *Geauga County Maple Leaf*, printed a lengthy story in its January 12, 2012, edition but did not post the story online. Table 1 outlines the outlets and the major themes identified in the news coverage.

Table 1. News themes and sourcing.

Outlet	Prominent theme	Sourcing
WKYC	Scandal/hazing	School officials
<i>News-Herald</i>	Unhealthy activity/news event	Parents/runners/school officials
FOX8 (WJW)	Unhealthy activity	Parents
<i>The Plain Dealer</i>	Story from other outlets	None

Commentary, as noted earlier, centered on two sites. The story posted on WKYC's Web site sparked 89 comments, many streaming in quickly after the story was posted online. The *News-Herald* story collected 102 comments over five days. In regards to RQ3, this study found that the television station's Web site served the same structural purposes of forming the public sphere as did the newspaper Web site, a powerful indicator of the role of technology and the rising potential of local television as a potential space for public dialogue. On each site, audience members expressed opinions, offered supposed fact, and reacted to each other.

Yet the analysis revealed the nature of the conversations were different on each site, which goes toward RQ4, how and whether the audience reacted to themes and sourcing. The audience dialogue did not go to the nature of each medium, television or newspaper and the different methods of presenting journalism, but rather to the nature of the journalism presented. On the television station site, many of the commenters attacked the journalism, itself. The majority of comments on *News-herald.com* debated the issue of whether high schoolers should be encouraged to take part in such events.

In both the cases of WKYC and the *News-Herald*, the reporting appeared distant from the community and sources closest to the event. In the case of WKYC, no parents, runners, or coaches were included in the initial report, only an uncomfortable-looking superintendent who watched the coach's video at the request of the station. The *News-Herald* article included quotes from a Chardon runner and the parent of a runner, both unnamed and both of whom supported the assistant coach. The outlets geographically closest to the community that allow digital commentary, the weekly *Maple Leaf* and the digital start-up *www.geauganews.com*, did not post coverage of the event and had no commentary.

The station came under a torrent of criticism for sensationalism and attacking a beloved coach. Those who followed the WKYC discussion were able to see a new narrative emerge as those directly involved in the event, community members, and those from outside the area heatedly discussed the nature of news and its impact on community. A commenter, for instance, who identified himself as Austin Arnold from Chardon and a participant in the event, suggested the station lied about the event. A respondent, Seth Hughes, was puzzled, 'I don't understand. How are they lying?' (Beres, 2012). Arnold came back:

They said we were forced by our coach to do this. they also said they tried to contact us but not a single one of us got a phone call from them. they said they couldnt contact us because they couldnt identify us when we were clearly introduced in the video, not try to be rude just stating the facts on how they lied.

The WKYC story, in fact, had not said the runners were forced, but appeared to imply as much by comparing the event to hazing. Those following the *News-Herald* dialogue had a different experience. While some directly involved in the event did contribute new information, the vast majority of the conversation centered on a debate over the appropriateness of the event, itself, and what should happen to the assistant coach. The *News-Herald* framed the story as a report on a television story, with its own reporting suggesting the issue was the appropriateness of the event, itself, and the fact that school administrators were meeting to discuss the issue, not whether it had been videotaped and posted on social media or whether WKYC should have done the story at all. The accompanying conversation appeared to pick up that theme. Noted one commenter, 'This coach/teacher needs to be fired. End of story' (Bonchak, 2012).

While the conversations served to create new and expanded story lines, the dialogue appeared to be confined by and in reaction to the journalism present. Foremost among these was

the framing of the story (Entman, 1989). WKYC's news anchor introduced the story as an exclusive that contained 'disturbing' video. Apparently, the disturbing part was the coach's tight shots on vomiting runners, which were blurred by the station. Together with the reporter's comparison to the event with college hazing and the superintendent's dour comment, the implication of wrongdoing was clear. Several commenters argued the reporting was so far removed from what actually happened that those without specialized knowledge should be quiet, including Nick Laudato in a reply to one of the few suggesting the coach was responsible for encouraging the event:

Nick Laudato: Jodi Cusare I find it interesting that you can't accept the fact that you are 100% wrong and ill-informed. You have yet to get the real story from anyone who attended the event, therefore you can't possibly argue a valid point. Good try trying to get other parents into this false story, but for now stay out of this whole argument. You are by far outnumbered.

In regard to RQ5, audience contributions to the ongoing dialogue, this study found that the lengthy and often heated dialogue not only challenged the journalism presented to them but also introduced new information, opinion, and perspective. In other words, the audience not only reacted with opinion but also reached for meaning, contributing in ways similar to what Ewart (2014) found in a study of talk back radio. For instance, a lengthy dialogue on news-herald.com centered on permission slips for the event, something mentioned by neither the reporting nor those who self-identified as being part of the event. The first mention of the permission slips came 24 h after the *News-Herald* posted the story:

to Chardon Charlatan wrote:

You are correct – nobody made the kids drink the egg nog but they needed a permission slip which I bet was printed on paper at the school to participate so this makes it a school function and I don't think adding rum to the mix would make it any better.

To to Chardon Charlaltan wrote:

Who do you think you are? You weren't even part of this event and you're trying to say we needed a permission slip? Everyone on here who thinks they know something doesnt. None of you participated.

Those closest to the event, runners, and witnesses did take part on the discussions spurred by the journalism on both the television station and the daily newspaper Web sites. In each case, those with firsthand knowledge used the technology available to them to combat what they perceived as inaccurate perceptions. In the case of WKYC, commenters overwhelmingly addressed the journalism, itself. In the case of the *News Herald*, commenters were more likely to address each other. In both, however, the dialogue formed a new narrative. Table 2 presents a breakdown of the dialogue. The two streams of dialogue represent competing narratives being constructed by three distinct groups, namely, participants or observers to the event, community stakeholders, and outsiders, those defined as having no apparent geographical or emotional stake in how the event was interpreted. The comments illustrate technology creating a space, a public sphere, for the audience to craft its own meaning, intertwining bits of firsthand accounts, facts culled from the accompanying news reports, reports from other sources, and statements and opinions from other commenters. The role of the commenters was defined as whether the commenter self-identified as being involved in the event, was a community member or had a direct link to the community, and was an outsider with an interest in the community or the issue. Good journalism and bad journalism were defined as whether the comments directly addressed the quality of the news report

Table 2. Breakdown of comments.

Web site	Parent/student involved	Past or present Chardon resident	Outside	Not identified	Total
WKYC	9 (10%)	47 (52.8 %)	21 (23.5 %)	12 (13.4 %)	89
News-herald	10 (9.8 %)	5 (64.9 %)	54 (52.9 %)	33 (32.3 %)	102
Primary content of comments					
Web site	Good journalism	Bad journalism	Sole focus on event	Other	
WKYC	0 (0%)	69 (77.5 %)	18 (20.2)	2 (2.2 %)	
News-herald	1 (.09 %)	10 (9.8 %)	86 (84.3 %)	6 (5.8 %)	

with which the comments were associated or whether the comments did not address the report, itself, but rather the issue of the so-called nog jog. Other was defined as comments that neither addressed the event nor the journalism involved.

In regard to RQ6, whether evidence could be found of audience convergence, this case study found such evidence. The analysis of the comments revealed audience members taking purported facts and statements from one stream to another. This occurred in the following two primary ways: the repetition of supposed fact and the direct mention of other news outlets into the public conversation. For instance, a commenter on news-herald.com, identified only as ‘not-so-dumb’ attempted to knit together both audience contributions and journalism: ‘*Geauga County Maple Leaf* interviewed some of the parents including Kelly Jordan who was in attendance. Also, many of the kids involved posted comments on another Web site stating that they had parent permission’. Interestingly, the weekly *Maple Leaf* had yet to go to print and did not post a story to its Web site, indicating the commenter had some specialized knowledge and was using this to take part in the public sphere. In another instance, a commenter on wkyc.com wrote:

You wrote, “No one that was in attendance has been interviewed or questioned.” Kelly Jordan was. Kids who were in attendance also commented on another comment board and insisted that everyone had parent permission, yet you say you participated and didn’t ask your mom. Maybe you and your friends need to get your facts straight before commenting on this.

The comments illustrate that the audience used journalism presented to them as an entry point into the conversation. Further, the audience collected bits of purported fact, opinion, and perspective from each other to knit together a narrative altered from that presented by the news reporting.

Discussion

What the commentary actually accomplished and whether and how much it was considered by the power structure as Habermas’ communicative action would suggest is impossible to quantify, but it seems unlikely it had no effect. The more direct affect, though again impossible to empirically verify, was on the journalism, itself. While not addressing its initial

reporting, the tenor and tone of WKYC's story changed. Nine days after the initial report, when Chardon Schools Superintendent Bergant announced he had decided to suspend the teacher for a day without pay, all hint of controversy was gone. Further, the initial facts appeared to change. Rather than links being emailed to the station and the school district, the video of the episode 'went viral'. The assistant coach, rather than organizing a hazing incident, had simply shown up. This was the entire report, which received no comments, on WKYC.com (WKYC, 2012):

CHARDON – An assistant cross country coach will be suspended for one day without pay in connection with an 'egg nog' running challenge.

Coach Mary Pat Martin did not organize the event. The students did and said they had no idea the coach would show up.

Coach Martin videotaped the challenge and could be heard at times narrating events.

The video went viral after it was posted on Facebook.

The challenge stemmed from similar so called "'nog jogs posted on-line.

Overall, this case study found an audience converging around a topic of interest, with individual members knitting together bits and pieces from other news outlets and each other. This examination found that the audience used technology to create its own narrative, as part of but ultimately diverging from the journalism presented to them. Of particular interest, perhaps, is the finding that those whose perspectives had been ignored by the initial reporting – the runners and parents directly involved in the incident – used the technology available to them to change the framing and narrative suggested by what they perceived as flawed journalism.

This goes toward the ideas expressed by Jenkins (2008) in the concept of a convergent culture that seeks to create its own narratives as well as previous research that suggested the audience at times acted in ways very similar to journalism, by adding their own perspective and purported fact. Yet something else was noted. The audience did not break the technological confines of the outlets that presented the deepest coverage of the incident. This is best seen through the following two outlets: the weekly *Geauga County Maple Leaf* and Cleveland.com. *The Maple Leaf* has a robust Web site that allows commentary. Cleveland.com offers an electronic bulletin board inviting viewers to launch their own discussions about matters of local interest. Yet the audience did not transport its conversation to either site, despite *The Maple Leaf* being the news outlet closest to the community where the incident occurred, and *The Plain Dealer* being by far the largest digital presence in the market, with more than four million unique monthly visitors (Alexa.com, 2014).

This implies the audience can and does converge but that certain conditions are more likely to promote this happening. The analysis revealed four such conditions, namely, a spark, or ignition event, that has the potential to arouse dialogue, journalism that makes the broader public aware of such an event, a sufficient mass of audience commentary to create debate, and a channel through which the debate can occur. This process represents a convergence of different public spheres, where audiences overlap and interact, taking with them bits and pieces from other public spheres to create a new one. In this overlapping sphere, new frames and narratives are created, part of but separate from the journalism presented to them. Figure 1 envisions this process.

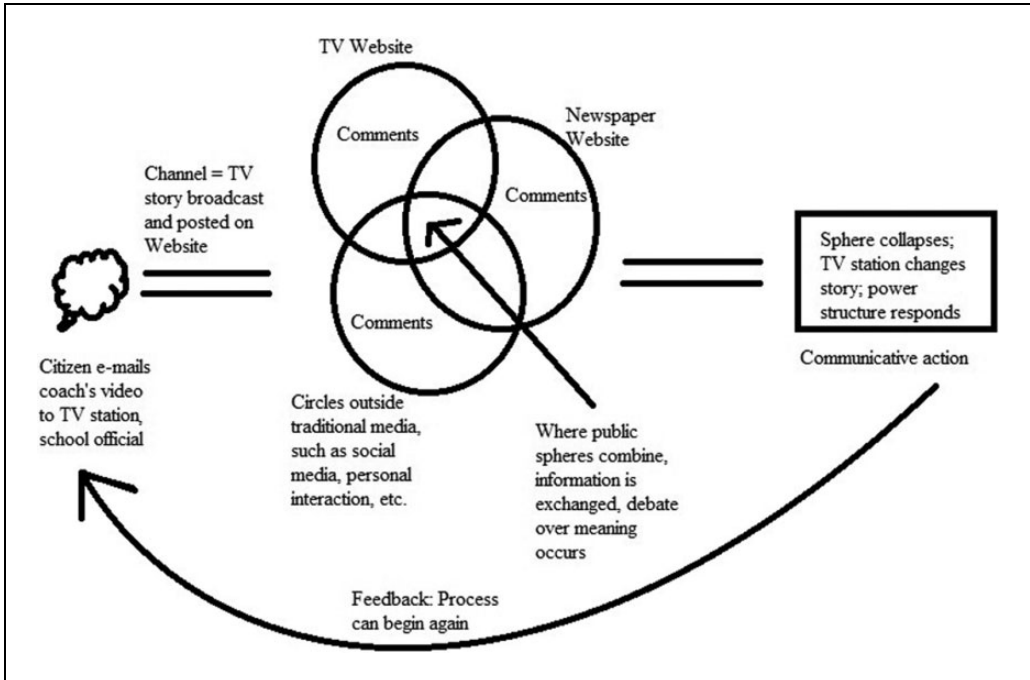


Figure 1. Audience convergence.

The characteristics of an ignition event, or spark, that leads to the formation of debate and dialogue likely are as varied as individuals. In this case, the analysis revealed several attributes of the nog jog that fall into traditional news values, namely, conflict, emotion, and proximity (Missouri Group, 2010). The analysis further revealed that journalism served as the catalyst, or the necessary ingredient for starting the dialogue. This was achieved through the way the story was framed and the audience adopting those frames as a starting point for dialogue and debate, but then a portion of the audience departing from the journalism to craft their own frames. The channels through which the debate occurred are essential for this process since, as Habermas envisioned, some gathering place is needed for the exchange of information and perspective. The media Web sites provided this space. Although outside the scope of this exploratory study, it is worth noting that as Jenkins (2008) theorized in the convergence culture, corporate policies that foster or inhibit dialogue are an important element of the structural space where debate occurs (or does not). In this case, the policies of both *The News-Herald* newspaper and WKYC allowed unedited commentary, with both sites restricting discussions only by suggesting that users serve as their own monitors by reporting comments seen as vulgar or inappropriate to site producers.

The overlapping sphere, of course, is seen only from the existing spheres. As such, it represents not a structural space per se, but rather the theoretical space where ideas, narrative, and new frames form. Keane (1995) was among those who first suggested that the ongoing collapse of traditional media, which served as mediators in the public sphere, had created an ever more chaotic environment for debate, suggesting overlapping spheres were forcing redefinitions of everything from public life to what constitutes the public good. My findings support such assertions, as seen in how

portions of the audience used the technology available to them to change the framing and narrative of the nog jog story. However, my findings also argue for the power of the traditional structural elements. While certainly altered from the more sedate and traditional public sphere, the media continue to hold enormous power to influence debate. Indeed, my findings suggest that but for the traditional (or legacy) elements of journalism the debate likely would not occur at all.

Conclusion

This case study sought to examine a specific episode in a specific market as way of teasing out larger issues associated with journalism, convergence, and the public sphere. Overall, I found a convergence of audience through technology but – more importantly – convergence across platforms through content, with individual members bringing in information, opinion, and perspective from one channel to another. In addition, this study found that the audience stayed largely within the confines of the news channels in which the deepest coverage was presented. Further, this study found that this is a dynamic process suggested by Habermas' articulation of a public sphere and communicative action. In this case, some in the audience rose to defend a community member in ways suggestive of but departing from traditional journalism. Several runners and parents who took part in or were present at the nog jog, for instance, used the technology and channels at their disposal to challenge the journalism presented to them by presenting what they purported to be firsthand accounts. Others – interested in but not necessarily connected to the event – participated in a simultaneously occurring different debate, whether the episode was hazing, unhealthy, or a nonevent.

These converged conversations collided in a new sphere created by the overlapping of existing public spheres. It was in this new space where the sharpest evidence was found of converged conversations, which I suggest can be envisioned as a process of carrying information and perspective from one channel to another. Within the news context, this occurs in reaction to the journalism but then takes off on its own, fueled by its own energy.

This study was limited in several ways. The results focused on a specific market and are not necessarily generalizable. Further, this exploratory story focused on a salient event to a local community where the initial news reporting was seen as inaccurate. This likely is not typical, and therefore no conclusions should be drawn about more routine coverage. In addition, this study did not examine social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, which may have represented yet another type of conversation. Future studies anticipate exploring this important avenue. In addition, the methods for this study had no way of tracking demographic information offered by commenters, thus relying on self-reports. Although geographic orientation proved an intriguing finding, verification presented an insurmountable issue in this particular case. However, future studies anticipate looking at this aspect of converged conversation.

Macek (2013), in his essay on convergence culture and the potential for democratic participation, suggested caution in interpreting audience curation of information as a reason to applaud converging technology. In that light, it is important to note what this study does *not* examine. No attempt was made to judge or measure the effect of audience narrative on either the journalism, as represented by the television Web site, or the formal power structure, in this case represented by the school district superintendent. Although certainly the tenor, tone, and even fact associated with the initial reporting changed after the audience dialogue, two

things occurring at the same time do not mean causation, and I do not mean to imply such, however strong the temptation.

Yet this exploratory study raised intriguing and important theoretical questions for the public sphere and the concept of convergent culture, particularly within the context of journalism as important to an ignition event. In other words, something happens, journalism decides to pay attention, the audience is engaged, conversation ensues, and the narrative changes, or at least has the potential to change. In the study outlined above, this is rather stark, in fact. Outlets in the same market that reported the nog jog episode but in ways that did not frame the event as scandal or wrongdoing had no commentary associated with their reporting, while those who did provide such frames hosted a vigorous debate. This phenomenon has wide implications for journalism as well as suggests avenues for further thinking about the public sphere as media and audience interaction evolves.

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