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**Partnerships and Public Service:
Normative Issues for Journalists in Converged Newsrooms**

Jane B. Singer

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ABSTRACT: As media companies test and implement newsroom “convergence,” growing numbers of journalists are producing content not only for their own employer but also for other media outlets with which that employer has a business relationship. This article, based on case studies in four converged news markets, explores journalists’ perceptions of normative pressures in this new media environment, particularly in relation to the overarching concept of public service. The findings suggest that although journalists do not see convergence itself as posing significant ethical problems, they do raise concerns related to specific components of public service, including a devotion to accuracy, an avoidance of sensationalism, and independence from economic pressures.

Partnerships and Public Service: Normative Issues for Journalists in Converged Newsrooms

“Build the news upon the rock of truth and righteousness, conduct it always upon the lines of fairness and integrity, acknowledge the right of the people to get from the newspaper both sides of every important question.”

-- G. B. Dealey, former Belo Corp. president and Dallas Morning News publisher

Inscription carved over entrance to the Dallas Morning News building.
The other buildings in Belo’s Dallas media “campus,” housing the network affiliate and cable news stations, contain no inscriptions.

Growing numbers of journalists are producing content not only for their own employer but also for other media outlets with which that employer has a business relationship. As media companies test and implement permutations of newsroom “convergence” or synergy, journalists encounter a host of economic, institutional, and cultural challenges. Among the latter are issues related to the central professional norm of public service.

Although all journalists emphasize public service, demands of different media forms result in different pressures for print, television and online news workers. Until now, journalists have been able to adopt an “us” and “them” view of their cross-media colleagues. But convergence potentially erases or at least blurs distinctions among media domains, leading to questions about changes that journalists may need to make in both the conceptualization and practice of news work.

Broadly defined, newsroom convergence refers to some combination of news staffs, products, technologies and geography among the previously separate provinces of print, television and online media. Specific processes and products vary widely among the nearly 100 U.S. and Canadian markets in which the concept is being explored (Convergence Tracker, 2005), ranging from sharing a news tip to creating a story for multiple platforms (Dailey, Demo & Spillman, 2003). Although the ability to cross-promote media products appears to be a major impetus for convergence explorations (Demo, Spillman & Dailey, 2004), common rationales also include interest in exploring new ways to tell stories and in facilitating communication both with and among audiences (Gordon, 2003).

This article, based on case studies in four converged news markets in early 2003, explores normative issues related to public service that arise as journalists provide news for multiple media formats. Its goal is to examine potential areas of tension and lay the groundwork for future empirical study. Journalists' perceptions and early experiences with convergence are used to interrogate normative areas of contention -- or accommodation.

PUBLIC SERVICE in PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Social scientists broadly define professions as occupations with particular power and prestige (Larson, 1977), and there have been innumerable attempts to identify and categorize the characteristics that distinguish such occupations from others. Despite disagreement about which occupations might be defined as “fully, partly, barely or not at all professional” (Barber, 1965, p. 17), substantial consensus exists about the general dimensions of professionalism. A cognitive dimension emphasizes a body of knowledge and techniques that professionals acquire and apply. An evaluative dimension implicitly compares professions with other occupations, notably in terms of autonomy and prestige (Birkhead, 1986; Larson, 1977). A normative dimension covers the public service orientation of professionals and their ethics, which justify the privilege of self-regulation that society accords them (Larson, 1977).

This study focuses on this last dimension, which includes formal ethical precepts such as those in codes of the Society of Professional Journalists (1996), American Society of Newspaper Editors (2002), and Radio-Television News Directors Association (2000). Codes created by media companies or individual outlets also offer guidelines, socializing employees to the ethical values of the company (Day, 2000). The normative dimension goes beyond explicit codes, however, to encompass broader precepts such as a commitment to public service and to standards of journalistic quality. In particular, the public service aspects of American journalism have been the basis for its strongest claims to professional status as it has evolved throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (Dennis, 1996).

Codes of Ethics and Public Service

The ethics code of the Society of Professional Journalists, an organization encompassing print, broadcast, and online journalists, echoes ideological claims of all professions, notably that autonomy is vital for uncompromised public service (Daniels, 1973). It also highlights truth-telling, respect for sources and others, independence, and accountability to the public. Within these broad groupings, issues rooted in the context of news work “help journalists recognize ethical dilemmas when they arise” (Black, Steele & Barney, 1999, p. 28). For instance, truth-telling includes testing “the accuracy of information from all sources” and “exercising care to avoid inadvertent error”; it also involves giving “voice to the voiceless,” with a reminder that “official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.” Independence includes denying “favored treatment to advertisers and special interests” and resisting their attempts to mold coverage (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996).

The comparatively brief American Society of Newspaper Editors statement of principles (2002) is the latest incarnation of ASNE’s 1922 “Canons of Journalism,” from which the SPJ code was derived. Its six principles include independence, truth, and accuracy, and it explicitly frames the notion of public service as a professional responsibility. The First Amendment, it states, “guarantees to the people through their press a constitutional right, and thereby places on newspaper people a particular responsibility” to pursue “a standard of integrity proportionate to the journalist’s singular obligation.”

The Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) code (2000) similarly highlights public service, accuracy and truth telling, independence, and accountability. It also offers specifics related to broadcast news coverage; for example, RTNDA exhorts members to use “surreptitious” newsgathering techniques, such as hidden cameras or microphones, sparingly if at all and to refrain from manipulating “images or sounds in any way that is misleading.” Unlike the SPJ or ASNE codes, the RTNDA code directly acknowledges that corporate influence can compromise professional autonomy, suggesting electronic journalists “refuse to allow the interests of ownership or management to influence news judgment and content inappropriately.”

Online journalism is still in the process of establishing its own professional credentials (Singer, 2003) and does not have an ethics code per se. However, the mission statement of the Online News Association (2004), an organization formed in 1999 by and for journalists “whose principal livelihood involves gathering or producing news for digital presentation,” lays out a set of “founding principles.” These include commitments to editorial integrity, independence, and excellence, as well as freedom of expression and of access to information.

Selected Normative Research

Media scholars have extensively explored normative aspects of journalism. Of particular relevance to this study of converged newsrooms has been research into effects of corporate imperatives on journalistic work. In looking at the potential effects of convergence on norms of public service, Davis and Craft (2000) focused on conflicts of interest from new corporate entanglements; they urged a redefinition of conflict of interest that would consider the dangers of institutional as well as individual conflicts. Williams (2002) suggested that synergy between and among divisions of a media corporation can jeopardize the distinction between editorial and commercial operations, though his analysis of major media organizations only partially supported this premise. More recently, a case study of converged news operations in Oklahoma City suggested the main benefit of convergence involved branding, or cross-promotion between the newspaper and television outlets, rather than the original goal of generating more in-depth news coverage (Ketterer et al., 2004).

However, such concerns predate convergence by many years. Researchers in the 1980s warned about “double standards” in ethical claims of independence from newspaper owners in joint operating agreements (Pratte, 1986-87), which continue to be ethically problematic (Blevens, 1995). Corporate media ownership has long been criticized on public interest grounds (McChesney, 1999; Bagdikian, 2000; Compaine & Gomery, 2000); McChesney argues that professional journalism “smuggles in values conducive to the commercial aims of the owners and advertisers” (2003, p. 305). McManus also is concerned by newsroom effects of corporatization, citing inherent conflict between the logics of

“maximizing return” and “maximizing public understanding” (1992, p. 205). He urges that journalistic ethics rely less on codes and more on mechanisms for dealing with “the growing influence of forces outside the newsroom, such as the executives of corporations that own news media, the interests of corporate ‘siblings,’ and the markets for investors, advertisers, sources and consumers” (McManus, 1997, p. 6). Borden offers strategies for journalists facing bottom-line demands: “Compromise does not have to be a bad word, as long as it safeguards basic professional principles” (2000, p. 162).

Commercial pressures also have been a focus of normative broadcast research. Increasing competition has led to a greater emphasis on “branding,” with promotion of news programming a primary aspect of this identity-building tactic for station managers (Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2001); the norm of public service thus is conceptualized as a selling point for attracting viewers and advertisers rather than a core component of journalism. The impact of sweeps months on television news has been scrutinized, as well. Although some news organizations provide strong public-interest journalism during sweeps periods, Ehrlich suggests “individual efforts to serve the public interest may be overwhelmed by organizational and institutional forces geared toward market interests” (1995, p. 46). In general, an emphasis on entertainment norms, embodied in performative aspects of television news, poses particular conflicts for broadcast journalists (Bantz, 1997).

Broadcast journalism research also has explored what has been seen as an undesirable emphasis on sensationalism and entertainment values in television news. For example, investigation of how journalists establish functional boundaries between themselves and non-journalists has highlighted the ways in which journalism is unlike entertainment, notably because of its public service mission of informing people rather than merely amusing them (Winch, 1998). A longitudinal study of network newscasts from the 1960s to 1990s indicated a marked increase in stories with undercurrents of sensationalism, including “crime, violence, disasters, sexual impropriety and other emotionally arousing elements” (Slattery, Doremus & Marcus, 2001, p. 298). While most news directors were reluctant to show dead people on the air, a majority had little problem showing bloody crime scenes or

interviewing close relatives of dead crime victims (Hadley, 1989). Shipman (1995) considered the ethical implications of showing images of an execution. He concluded that the public can obtain what it needs to know about capital punishment, and journalists can fulfill their normative obligation to truth-telling, without such sensational images.

In addition, television news-gathering routines have been examined for their effects on normative behavior. Tuggle and Huffman (2001) suggest that emphasis on live shots to “punch up” a newscast and inject it with energy is replacing consideration of the newsworthiness of a story. They question whether the public is well served when time and resources are routed away from “more meaningful reporting” (p. 343). News staged for the purpose of capturing it on television also is ethically problematic, particularly when the audience is deceived into believing that what they see happened naturally when in fact it was arranged for the camera (Linn, 1991).

There has been relatively little scholarly investigation of online journalistic ethics, but some published reports have appeared. In a survey of ethical issues raised by new communication technologies, Cooper (1998) pointed out that codes and standards become impossible to implement in a global medium whose participants represent numerous ethical mores. Among the issues he highlights with implications inside converged newsrooms are conflicts of interest among media partners and plagiarism, with its associated concerns about authenticity, authorship, and accuracy. In considering online challenges to professionalism, Singer (2003) suggests that a medium with few gatekeepers, “in which deadlines are perpetual and competition is intense,” can create enormous pressure to run stories before they are verified (p. 152). Cohen (2002) examines the dynamics of online journalism at various levels, warning that market-driven concerns may dominate the new medium; in particular, demands for continuous updates can compromise accuracy and standards of newsworthiness. And Boczkowski (2004), in exploring how online newsroom practices and products shift in response to new technological capabilities, suggests that technical considerations are inextricably linked to such issues as who gets to tell the stories, how they are told, and to what public they are addressed. Convergence,

he adds, should be viewed as “a contingent process in which actors may follow diverging paths as a result of various combinations of technological, local and environmental factors” (p. 210).

Scholars outside the United States also have begun to examine the ethics of online journalism. In reviewing journalists’ use of the Internet to defy a court-ordered publication ban in a Canadian murder case, Easton (1997) found that “cybercasters” violated ethical conventions of accuracy, objectivity, taste, and accountability. But he also concluded that the participatory, libertarian ethic of the new medium might provide a healthy counterpoint to the paternalism of mainstream journalism. Dutch journalists see the medium as providing fresh opportunities to enhance accuracy by allowing immediate correction of mistakes; they also see commercial pressures as potentially damaging individual users’ rights to privacy (Deuze & Yeshua, 2001).

This study explores these normative concerns in the context of converged newsrooms. In particular, it examines whether journalists in such newsrooms see convergence as challenging core aspects of public service. It poses these research questions:

RQ1: What normative issues related to public service are salient for journalists in converged newsrooms?

RQ2: Do journalists in each medium see their own normative values as different from the normative values held by their cross-media counterparts?

RQ3: Do journalists perceive convergence as posing threats to public service norms?

METHOD

Four converged news organizations were chosen as case study subjects, based on information in the trade press and from the American Press Institute, which tracks convergence around the country. The researcher sought media outlets of varying market sizes, ownership structures, and approaches to convergence, appropriate to a method whose fundamental question is what can be learned from a particular case (Stake, 1994). Such field research is called for when research questions involve learning about, understanding, or describing a group of interacting people (Neuman, 1991). Although geographical location of the news outlets was not a primary concern, the fact that several Florida

media outlets were among the first to experiment with convergence, giving them the most experience with converged operations at the time of the study, did affect the choice of newsrooms to study.

After negotiating access with newsroom gatekeepers, the following sites were visited. Print circulation figures are from the Audit Bureau of Circulations (2002) as of September 2002, just a few months before the study; broadcast figures are from Nielsen Media (2003) in early 2003.

*** The Dallas Morning News, WFAA-TV (ABC affiliate), TXCN (cable), dallasnews.com, wfla.com, txcn.com**

The Morning News has more than half a million readers on weekdays and nearly 800,000 on Sundays. WFAA-TV is the top-rated station in a market of 2.2 million households, seventh largest in the nation. TXCN is a 24-hour statewide cable news network. Dallasnews.com, launched in 1996, provides original content as well as content from the local partners; WFAA and TXCN also have associated Web sites. Belo Corp. oversees these media outlets from its national headquarters across the street.

*** The Tampa Tribune, WFLA-TV (NBC affiliate), TBO.com**

Richmond, VA-based Media General Inc. invested \$40 million to build The News Center, a 120,000-square-foot riverside “temple of convergence” in downtown Tampa (Colon, 2000). The News Center houses the Tribune, a 203,000 daily and 281,000 Sunday circulation newspaper; WFLA-TV, which serves 1.6 million households in the thirteenth-largest U.S. market; and TBO.com, which provides original content plus material from print and television.

*** The Sarasota (FL) Herald-Tribune, SNN Channel 6 (cable), heraldtribune.com**

The Herald-Tribune, a New York Times Co. paper, has a summer circulation of 95,000 on weekdays and 120,000 on Sundays; its readership swells in winter. The city and county are part of the Tampa Bay television market but also are served by SNN (Six News Now), a 24-hour local cable news operation co-owned by the Herald-Tribune and cable provider Comcast.

*** The Lawrence (KS) Journal-World, 6News Lawrence (cable), ljworld.com, lawrence.com, KUsports.com**

These properties are part of the family-owned World Company, started by the current publisher’s grandfather in the late 19th century. The Journal-World has a daily and Sunday circulation of just under 20,000. 6News Lawrence is a local cable news and entertainment channel. In addition to news-oriented ljworld.com, Web staffers produce KUsports.com and lawrence.com, an entertainment site targeted at a young audience.

The researcher spent a week in each market during January and February 2003, observing newsroom operations, attending meetings, and interviewing journalists about convergence. A non-probability sample combined elements of a convenience sample, appropriate in exploratory studies such as this, and a purposive sample of subjects selected for specific characteristics (Wimmer & Dominick, 2002). The key characteristic here involved convergence experiences, but the desire to

include print, television, and online journalists also was important. An interview guide that organized a list of topics to be covered, but provided flexibility in their order and articulation (Lindlof, 1995), was used to conduct interviews with 120 journalists, including news managers, editors, anchors, reporters, columnists, photographers, and online content producers.

Interviews subsequently were transcribed from hand-written notes made on-site; such notes can be transcribed much more quickly than audio recordings, and the timeliness of the research topic made a quick turnaround especially valuable. For purposes of this study, the 120 transcripts were examined for references to normative issues covered in the journalistic codes of ethics described above. Thus the particular public service themes were defined by normative constructs laid out in the codes, and their articulation by individual journalists emerged from a close reading of the interview transcripts. The interview guide included a short series of questions related to the effect of convergence on public service; related normative topics also emerged from the dialogues between journalists and researcher.

All such references to various aspects of public service were extracted and a separate file was created; this file grouped the transcribed material into normative categories such as “accountability,” “accuracy,” and so on. The researcher was the sole analyst of these data, following standard practice in the analysis of discourse, which requires a deep understanding of the culture and its social practices (Lindlof, 1995). Such an understanding would not be available to those lacking the context provided by time spent in the unique environment of the converged newsrooms.

Journalists also completed a questionnaire about convergence. Triangulation of methods, such as this combination of interviews and surveys, helps counter the danger that findings reflect the method of inquiry in potentially misleading ways (Babbie, 2000). Questionnaires are good at revealing distribution of attitudes in a population (Lindlof, 1995), as here. Each journalist received a questionnaire immediately after his or her interview, with the exception of senior executives outside the focus on newsroom staffers and one bureau reporter interviewed by phone. The questionnaire was provided after the interview so journalists could complete it at their leisure and, if desired, away from

work. Using a 7-point Likert scale, respondents indicated agreement or disagreement with fifty-four statements about the perceived impact of convergence. Demographic data and open-ended comments also were solicited. The response rate was 81.8% of the 110 journalists who were given questionnaires; it was 84.5% for newspaper journalists, 75% for television journalists and 85.7% for online journalists.

All journalists were promised confidentiality so that they felt comfortable speaking and completing the questionnaire honestly, and no names are used here. The researcher's institution did not require human subjects board approval for this study.

FINDINGS

The findings begin with the overarching professional norm of public service. Specific aspects of public service then are explored through consideration of three normative issues explicitly covered in journalistic codes of ethics; the section concludes with a look at the journalistic norm of independence that raises new issues in a converged environment. This article focuses exclusively on data gathered through the case study interviews; questionnaire responses for those interested in supportive quantitative evidence are available on the journal's Web site, www.jmme.org.

Findings: Public Service Overview

The SPJ code begins by advising that "serving the public with thoroughness and honesty" is the goal of all conscientious journalists (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996), and innumerable observers have defined the primary purpose of journalism as providing citizens with information they need to be free and self-governing (see Gans, 2003; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Most journalists in this study explicitly discussed public service, either in response to a question from the researcher or of their own volition – and most said convergence facilitated expression and even expansion of their public service role. This belief stemmed from a perception that convergence enables the audience to get news in multiple complementary ways and to obtain a richer account informed by more resources. Interviewees discounted concerns of "ivory-tower critics" about media monopolies.

Converged newsrooms serve an audience that is already converged in a practical sense: “People don’t get their news from just one source any more. You’ve got to be where they want you, when they want you,” a newspaper editor said. A story in three different media obviously can reach more people. But journalists emphasized the value lay not in providing the same story three times but rather in the ability to enhance a story’s scope and impact by capitalizing on each medium’s unique attributes – visuals on television, depth in print, timeliness online. “When we do it best, we provide a 360 perspective on a story that you couldn’t get anywhere else,” a television journalist said. “The bottom line is our viewers are going to be served better by it.” Though some questioned whether this view reflected reality or simply a hope (or management hype of an economically motivated move), belief in at least the potential for enhanced public service seemed close to universal.

Journalists, particularly those in television, also cited the value of access to expanded resources facilitated by convergence. “It makes our product better having access to the resources and the minds and the expertise of every other journalist in this building,” one television manager said. Print journalists agreed that their experience, along with access to reference materials and staffs standard in newspaper but not broadcast newsrooms, enhanced the television news product – though most said the benefits did not flow both ways. “The newspaper is the whale, the others are the pilot fish,” said one print reporter. “The other entities get more from us than we get from them.”

This view that convergence enhances public service should not suggest that journalists are oblivious to economic motivations. On the contrary, they acknowledged a bottom-line corporate rationale for convergence. But their own views, tied to their own professional values, were on the whole more optimistic than cynical. A television reporter described convergence as expanding “our ability to do our job truly exponentially. Whom does that benefit? The consumer.” Interviews with news executives in all four markets suggested they have worked hard to pitch to their staffs the idea of convergence as a public service boon – apparently with success. “If synergy is about economic efficiency, then it isn’t ever going to take hold in the newsroom. If it’s about quality journalism and

doing things better with more tools, then it will,” said one manager. “I don’t expect the newsroom to rally around synergy as an economic model because they won’t, and frankly, they shouldn’t.”

As noted, it has been argued that in the long term, convergence makes less, not more, information available to the public by reducing the number of distinct media voices. Though a few journalists felt concentration of media ownership was potentially “troublesome,” most said it was “realistically not very likely” that markets would end up with one news provider. Even converged newsrooms still make independent news judgments and create a unique product. Shared resources mean more and better information, not less news overall, journalists said.

However, there were doubters. Some said reduced competition diminished their “edge” and thus their incentive to “hustle” on a story. Before convergence, a print reporter in a smaller market said, he raced all over the courthouse trying to find something the television reporter didn’t have; now a single reporter does a courthouse check for three outlets. Issues of cross-promotion that some journalists saw as excessive, plus other economic pressures, also are salient and are discussed below.

Findings: Public Service Norms Operationalized in Professional Codes

Professional codes of ethics stress a set of common norms intended to guide journalists in meeting their public service obligations. These include a commitment to accuracy, avoidance of sensationalism (described in the SPJ code as “pandering to lurid curiosity”), and a need to treat sources with respect and dignity. Convergence foregrounds such values, as journalists get an inside look at how cohorts in other media operationalize these norms. This study indicates journalists are concerned that convergence potentially undermines or at least threatens specific normative standards. In all three areas, newspaper journalists expressed the most concern.

Accuracy: About two dozen journalists explicitly discussed issues of accuracy during their interviews, and their comments revolved around several key issues. Print journalists have always been quick to laugh at the mistakes of on-air personalities. But when the television news program is publicly and prominently affiliated with the newspaper, the gaffes of the “blow-dried airheads” quickly cease to

be amusing. The problem was particularly apparent in smaller markets with significant disparities in experience levels between print and cable television journalists. “We’re really meticulous about that stuff. They should be more meticulous, too,” one newspaper reporter said. “It reflects on the whole thing.” A colleague incensed by repeated instances of misspelled names, inaccurate titles, and other similar mistakes agreed that “if we allow little errors to creep in that undermine the quality of the work we’re trying to do, it does us all a disservice.” Nor does the culture of television, where every second of air time is at a premium, accommodate corrections as easily as print or online media.

The other major challenge to accuracy is speed, with newspaper journalists concerned by television’s need for timely information, and both television and print journalists concerned by the Web’s even-greater demand for up-to-the-second news. Yet electronic journalists chafe at what they see as delaying tactics that undermine news value. Especially rankling are requests for embargoes so the paper can break a story first. The issue, one executive said, should be which medium can tell the story best, but that gets lost “in discussion of whose damned story it is.”

Electronic journalists also are annoyed by print colleagues’ lack of urgency in covering breaking news. Metro reporters need a fire lit under them, said one journalist with television and online experience. It can be hard to break the mind set of “I’ll go write this at four in the afternoon,” after what another online journalist described as lunch and time to “walk around and think about it.” But print journalists say losing time to think is dangerous. They also say they are being pressured to make information available before they have had time to check their facts. “You worry about not necessarily getting it wrong, but not quite right,” a columnist explained.

A hallmark of convergence efforts is a shared news budget or rundown, the list of daily stories that briefly describes what the reporter thinks the final piece will be. Budgets are used in editorial meetings to plan the evening newscast or the next day’s paper; in converged newsrooms, they also act as a tip sheet, informing journalists in each medium what their counterparts are working on. But budgets promote what they describe: Editors and producers lobby for stories to lead the newscast or go

on the front page, so reporters have an incentive to write budget items that make their stories sound irresistible. Journalists expressed concern that this combination of functions could lead to inaccuracy when news stories are based on budget items. In more than one newsroom, they said the Web staff, hungry for fresh local news, was creating stories from budgets that may be mere wish lists.

Sensationalism and Entertainment Values: Although journalists in all four markets said their convergence partners rose above the “if it bleeds, it leads” stereotype, more than thirty journalists also expressed concerns about variations in news judgment or news values. Stereotype or not, crime, accident and fire stories that are, in the words of one print reporter, “quick, easy, and visual” are more apt to get good play on television than in print. Print journalists said convergence puts more emphasis on “splashy, TV-oriented stories,” to the detriment of the “more issue-oriented” pieces that work well in the newspaper. A few were upset about having to do what they considered trivial or non-newsworthy stories simply because their partnered television station was doing them.

Several Web journalists said the drift toward sensationalism is even more pronounced online, driven by a demand for high usage numbers rather than public service goals or norms. Users gravitate toward crime and “anything to do with sex” on the Web, one editor said. Another online journalist wondered about her site’s “editorial mission.” “Are we trying to cover news or get the most hits? What’s driving our work?” she asked. “Porn will get a lot of hits” but damage credibility.

Such normative concerns are more broadly about what journalists perceive as a real or potential clash between news values, conceptualized as providing what (in their view) the public needs, and entertainment values, which journalists see as providing what the public wants. The public service orientation of the journalistic profession elevates the former and denigrates the latter, and though all commercial media must attract and keep an audience, the degree to which that concern is part of the reality of daily news work varies. Newspaper journalists generally are not under constant pressure from circulation numbers; as one print reporter put it, they do not have “ratings that come in every freaking week, and you live and die by them.” The pressure on Web staffs is often even more intense

than in television, with daily hit logs providing excruciatingly precise details about which online components attracted users and which did not.

However, not all journalists shared these concerns. Some said convergence provided more ways to balance audience needs and wants. For example, a print reporter said the closer relationship with television highlighted the fact that the paper was ignoring “chicken-dinner events” that were meaningful to readers. “We began to understand there was a lot going on in our community that we were not paying attention to,” he said. A few said ignoring the need to attract and keep an audience was not only naïve but also irresponsible. “You may have the best dog food in the world, but if no dog is going to eat it, what good is it?” asked one online manager.

Nonetheless, convergence foregrounds concerns about the potential for entertainment values to dominate news work. Journalists articulated two aspects of this normative concern, one related to the content and the other to the people delivering it. Print journalists’ characterization of television news as lightweight is hardly new. “Print reporters love bashing TV news more than anything,” a newspaper reporter said. “We always judge it by our standards, which really isn’t very fair.” But convergence makes entertainment aspects of television news a threat in ways they were not before the products were linked. “If we become a slave to an entertainment medium, maybe we’ve lost something. It hasn’t happened, but I can see the potential,” said another print writer.¹

Journalists also characterized television news as focused on personality and image, traits they saw as more fitting for entertainers than for professional news workers. “We [in the media] like to carry our Big J Journalism around with us,” said a cable executive. “On TV, it’s personality that drives programs.” Television is “the whole cult of personality thing,” a print reporter said – after all, how many billboards contain the gigantic faces of print journalists? Many print journalists said they had gained respect for on-air counterparts and realized that good television journalism is hard work, but they also found themselves worrying about their looks, voice, outfits – polo shirts wrinkle too fast,

dark clothes evoke “hit men from the Sopranos.” “It doesn’t sound very much like journalism,” said one veteran print reporter who frequently appeared on television. “But it’s part of it.”

Source Relations: An emphasis on personality, in which the journalist becomes a bigger part of the story, also affects source interactions. Journalists saw convergence as having varied effects on information-gathering, as well as on the normative concepts of treating sources respectfully and giving “voice to the voiceless.” Among the more than three dozen journalists who explicitly discussed the effects of convergence on source relations, some said cross-platform exposure had led to increased contacts from audience members with an important story to tell, as well as from media-savvy sources seeking “more bang for the buck.” At the same time, ordinary people are more likely to be cowed by television’s relatively intrusive news-gathering techniques.

A number of print journalists cited the benefits of heightened visibility on their beats. A business reporter said television had so enhanced his presence that he now had more stories than he could handle because of people contacting him. “I get calls now for the first time in my life with people saying ‘this is your kind of story,’” said a veteran print journalist. “That’s very nice.” Even one of the most vocal opponents of convergence admitted he liked “anything that gives me a lead.”

Journalists also generally saw convergence as beneficial in dealings with public officials or other media-savvy sources. An online story can result in immediate calls from officials eager to get their spin into the next day’s paper, one editor said. Politicians, in particular, “like to talk to TV,” a print journalist said, adding that convergence thus enables the public to hear more perspectives. Another political reporter said the Web site expands his audience, bringing contacts from across the country. And a sports reporter pointed out that for his sources, seeing stories on television is a huge plus. “All of the athletes watch,” he said. “They don’t always read, but they all watch.”

For less prominent sources, some journalists said, convergence highlights potential problems. Print reporters who always grumbled about the disruptive staging requirements of video are even more annoyed when the cameras are a part of their own information-gathering and source interactions. “It’s

hard to be a fly on the wall with a huge tripod,” said one. Some sources “freak out” when they see a camera; others may be confused about what will be done with information they provide. In general, journalists felt media-savvy sources had learned quickly how to turn converged news processes to their own advantage, but ordinary people were more likely to be uncomfortable and even intimidated.

Convergence also turns journalists themselves into sources for counterparts in partnered media. They may become key informants; “those folks [at the paper] have contacts, eyes and ears that we don’t have,” one television journalist explained. Some newspaper reporters have taken on the role of in-house experts, “veteran people who can speak with authority” on air. Sometimes, professional norms conflict; one government reporter was appalled when an anchor asked him to predict who would win a local election. He refused, though others seem more comfortable doing what a photographer labeled “opinionizing.” The blurring line between journalist as interviewer and interviewee merits additional exploration, not just in connection with convergence but also in the context of the explosion of Weblogs and other outlets for journalists to offer personal views.

Findings: Journalistic Independence

Previous research (Davis & Craft, 2000; McManus, 1997) has suggested that journalism needs a new normative standard that highlights the need for independence from economic pressures, including those from within the journalist’s own company. Journalists “have a social obligation that can actually override their employers’ immediate interests” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 52). Convergence raises fresh challenges, particularly as cross-promotion has been a key feature of many efforts to date (Demo, Spillman & Dailey, 2004; Ketterer et al., 2004). Journalists’ primary concern in this area centered on what they saw as excessive use of one medium to “brand,” promote, or market another, an issue discussed by about forty-five journalists in this study. They had milder concerns about the separation of editorial and commercial content, and the trend toward market monopoly, topics that about three dozen journalists touched on in their interviews.

As mentioned, most journalists in this study discounted the charge that convergence was leading to a market monopoly on news. They acknowledged an audience perception of diminished media diversity but said the reality was that competition remained strong, particularly in television and online. “It’s a very independent deal,” a journalist explained. “We’re not all the same thing at the same time.” A journalist in a smaller market said he hears concerns about ownership bias at “every party I ever go to,” but the charge is “180 degrees not true.” Journalists “bend over backwards” to be accurate, he added. “We all feel responsible to serve the public.”

Somewhat more problematic was the potential for increased commercial influence in a converged environment. Several print journalists expressed discomfort with a “smushed-together” relationship between advertisers or sponsors and news providers both online and on-air. But such influence was seen more as a potential problem than a real one. For example, a newspaper reporter whose once-a-week television piece is sponsored said that while the arrangement gave him an uncomfortable “journalistic hair-on-the-back-of-the-neck feeling,” the sponsor had never actually sought to influence his story. The Web site provoked even more uneasiness, primarily because profit has been so hard to come by for online media outlets. “Their charge is, above all else, make money,” one print journalist said. In another market, editorial and advertising staffers work side by side; in a third, online news staffers work on classified ads, and advertising staffers have a major role in overall site design. Even in markets where the line between news and advertising is seen as sacrosanct, Web staffers are explicitly reminded that “there is no paycheck fairy,” an online manager said.

But the biggest challenge of convergence to the norm of editorial independence came from what many saw as excessive use of one partnered medium’s news content to promote the same story in another – a perception supported by preliminary research in this area, as described above. The most common source of concern was using a television news story to urge viewers to buy the next day’s newspaper for more details. “I think, gee whiz, if you’ve got the facts, give them to me now – don’t tell me to go pick up the paper tomorrow,” said one cable journalist. Another journalist in the same market

said there was so much on-air promotion that “it went from being a newscast to being a half-hour advertisement for the newspaper.” In general, teasers to the Web site were not seen as similarly problematic, though a few journalists questioned the wisdom of driving the audience to a medium with no viable business model.

However, other journalists saw a public service aspect to cross-promotion, saying the use of convergence partners as promotional vehicles was sensible for the company and beneficial to the audience. “It’s all about the brand and getting the brand out there,” an online journalist said. Several print journalists said a television story could boost readership by whetting viewers’ appetites; “that’s the biggest appeal,” one said. A number of television journalists saw promos as a reminder that the newspaper “fills in the blanks for those who want more information about a certain subject.”

Overall, although some journalists saw convergence as creating new economic pressures that could undermine their news products in various ways, there was no consensus that the reality matched the potential. Their comments rearticulated the desirability of independence as a norm, but current manifestations of convergence generally were not seen as significantly jeopardizing that norm. The greatest concern arose over use of news time or space for in-house promotion, but many saw such use as logical and appropriate, even construing it as a new opportunity to serve the public.

SUMMARY of FINDINGS

This exploratory study has examined how journalists perceive newsroom convergence affecting norms related to public service. The first research question asked what issues are salient for journalists in converged newsrooms. In addition to discussing what they saw as explicit connections between convergence and public service, related areas of normative concern that emerged from these case studies included accuracy, sensationalized or entertainment-oriented news coverage, source relations, and the use of news content as a promotional tool.

The second research question asked whether print, broadcast, and online journalists see their own normative values as different from values held by their cross-media counterparts. The findings

suggest that although public service values are shared across media, journalists tend to see convergence partners as comparatively less diligent about upholding them. In particular, print journalists saw television journalists as less committed to accuracy; more likely to provide sensational or entertainment-oriented news; and less sensitive to source discomfort with intrusive news-gathering tools. These are hardly new perceptions; newspaper people have long criticized television journalists for what they see as unprofessional behavior. But convergence makes the differences more problematic because of the closer identification with and connections among partnered media. In addition, television journalists resented use of their limited news space for efforts to promote the print partner, an issue related to the norm of independence from economic interests. The Web was less likely to be the focal point of normative concerns among these journalists, but issues related to online accuracy, entertainment-oriented content, and commercial influence surfaced.

The third research question asked whether journalists saw convergence itself as posing threats to public service norms. This study suggests that journalists in converged newsrooms have a generally positive view about convergence in the context of serving their audience. They do not see the process as a threat to ethics, standards, or values. On the contrary, most expressed the belief that shared expertise and resources result in a stronger and more multi-faceted news product that reaches more people. Serious concerns about effects of media corporatization raised in previous research did not find substantial support here. Journalists recognized that convergence is tied to business relationships, but that did not necessarily mean “worse” journalism according to their perceptions of public service.

That said, the devil is in the details. In considering specific professional norms – the ways that public service is enacted – journalists did think convergence could pose threats to their own news-production unit that were seen as less severe or less imminent when the newspaper and the television station, in particular, were separate. In other words, variations in the way norms are operationalized did not matter much to journalists in different media outlets – until those outlets were explicitly and publicly positioned as closely linked. Newspaper journalists could laugh when television journalists

got things wrong, but the joke was less amusing when “they” became a part of “us.” Television journalists could ignore newspaper marketing efforts, but not when they had to end their own stories with a teaser to the next day’s paper.

For the most part, however, the emphasis was on “could” among a majority of the journalists here. Aside from concrete examples such as those mentioned, many of their concerns were about potential normative threats from convergence rather than actual experiences. At some point, they might be asked to do, or not do, particular stories at a particular time in a particular way because of the converged news environment – but with exceptions here and there, it had not happened yet. And the exceptions involved specific situations: a market with a significant imbalance in experience levels between the print and television staffs, for example, or even an individual journalist ordered to do a story he considered trivial because the television station was airing a related item.

CONCLUSIONS

This study suggests that at least within the newsrooms included here, convergence has failed to raise serious concerns about its fundamental compatibility with the core journalistic norm of public service. These journalists did express cross-cultural concerns about counterparts doing things in different and potentially problematic ways. But at a broader level, they were sanguine about the impact of newsroom convergence on their professional mandate to serve the public. In principle, most of them supported convergence as an appropriate activity for a news organization committed to public service.

In other words, few of these journalists said that they believed that their fundamental public service role was challenged by convergence – yet at the same time, they articulated ways in which, arguably, it is. In particular, economic forces identified in previous research – such as an increased emphasis on the blending of promotion with news delivery, as well as a decrease in the number of mediated voices being heard in a community -- do exist and are exacerbated by convergence. The fact that many journalists seem relatively untroubled by their prospects is disturbing.

The argument that alerting audience members to stories in partnered media outlets is a form of public service seems a somewhat disingenuous rationalization. Such practices serve the media organization far more significantly than they do the public. It seems unlikely that large numbers of people are buying the newspaper because they are driven to learn more about a story on the previous evening's newscast, for instance. On the other hand, media organizations have a great deal to gain, particularly in comparison with competitors within their market, by establishing their "brand" as the most thorough news providers in town.

Also open to challenge is the argument that shrinkage in the number of credible news voices in a community, however small, is not a cause of concern because of an overabundance of information providers in an age of 24/7 cable and Internet news. At a purely quantitative level, it is indisputable that information is ubiquitous today. But the quality of that information varies enormously, precisely because most of the people providing it do not have a commitment to public service. The production of fewer unique bits of journalism as a result of convergence may be insignificant in terms of the quantity of stories but far more significant in terms of the quality of those stories, particularly local ones.

It is journalists' professional responsibility to cover their communities truthfully, accurately, and independently; doing so takes a combination of time, talent, and resources that news organizations remain – at least for the moment -- uniquely able to provide. Today's media environment may indeed multiply the number of stories being covered and voices empowered to speak, but established news organizations continue to be overwhelmingly dominant as the places people turn for credible information (Online: Audience, 2004). To maintain the dominance, they must retain the credibility; if they lose it, the public indeed has myriad new options for informing – or amusing – themselves.

Journalists should be concerned by these effects and these issues. Convergence appears to be a trend in news organizations (Convergence Tracker, 2005; Gordon, 2003), and journalists should work to see that the public continues to be served. This study suggests that they have already identified ways to do so. They recognize the value in telling important stories in different rather than duplicative ways.

They understand the need to maintain a distance between news and marketing. Perhaps most important, they realize, in large part thanks to convergence efforts, that their own public service norms are broadly shared across media. They might build on this new understanding by establishing cross-media mentoring networks; such networks could enable less-experienced journalists to learn from senior colleagues not only within their own newsrooms but also in partnered newsrooms, potentially creating an avenue for making the higher standards the universal ones.

Finally, a couple of caveats about the research presented here are in order. First, this article reports findings of case studies, and the method makes it difficult to tell which concerns are systemic and which are specific to the selected cases. Additional research is needed to refine this picture – ideally, research that draws a larger and more representative sample of journalists in converged newsrooms so that generalizable conclusions can be reached. Second, convergence does create significant pressures outside of the normative framework considered here, most notably time constraints for journalists already stretched thin by existing responsibilities to their “home” medium. Future exploration of the interplay between these concrete daily pressures and professional normative constructs as the number of converged newsrooms grows will facilitate understanding of the process and its effects not only on journalists but on the public they serve.

ENDNOTE

1. Print journalists who cover the television industry expressed unique concerns about a direct conflict of interest resulting from convergence. Television writers in this study said convergence has made it virtually impossible for them to effectively critique local television because their affiliation with one station undermines normative claims of editorial independence. Since convergence, “rightly or wrongly, they consider me the enemy,” one television writer said of local sources. Another flatly said that he refuses to write about either his convergence partner station or the competition, adding that to do so would be unethical.

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