

Innovating in a Crisis: Canadian Media Actors Assess the State of Convergence

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ABSTRACT *Our content analysis conducted in 2007 revealed little evidence of convergence practices in television networks and newspapers owned by Canwest Global, CTVglobemedia, and Quebecor. In 2009 and early 2010, we interviewed executives and journalists of the media groups studied, as well as other stakeholders, to assess the current situation and speculate about the future of convergence in Canada. Respondents generally acknowledged that TV/print newsroom integration had not succeeded and that future convergence efforts would focus on delivering content online and developing a viable economic model for news production. Respondents offered diverse perceptions of conventional media's ability to reinvent and sustain themselves as the principal news sources for Canadians. Emerging models include the development of a corporate news service, specialization in certain topic areas, and cross-media collaboration.*

KEYWORDS *Newsroom convergence; Media ownership; Diversity of information; Comparative analysis*

résumé *Notre analyse de contenu réalisée en 2007 n'a révélé aucune preuve substantielle de convergence entre les nouvelles télévisées et les journaux appartenant aux groupes Canwest Global, CTVglobemedia et Quebecor. Nous avons réalisé une série d'entrevues auprès de gestionnaires et journalistes des médias étudiés, de même que d'autres acteurs du milieu, en 2009 et 2010, afin de recueillir leur évaluation de la situation actuelle et leur vision de l'avenir de la convergence médiatique. De l'avis général des participants, l'intégration des nouvelles télévisuelles et de la presse écrite ne s'était pas réalisée et les initiatives futures s'orienteront surtout vers l'offre en ligne et la rentabilisation des contenus d'information. Ils ont émis des points de vue variés quant à la capacité des médias conventionnels de se réinventer et se maintenir en tant que sources principales d'information pour les Canadiens. Parmi les modèles émergents identifiés : le développement d'agences de presse corporatives, la spécialisation thématique et la collaboration entre médias.*

Mots clés *Convergence journalistique; Propriété des media; Diversité de l'information; Analyse comparative*

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Hailed by some as an effective strategy to help conventional media adapt to a rapidly changing environment, feared by others as a threat to the diversity and quality of news, convergence remains a controversial and ambiguous concept. It is usually associated with “the blending or merging of formerly distinct media technologies, mainly based on digitization processes” (Quandt & Singer, 2009, p. 130); it is also multidimensional and dynamic, involving “technological, managerial, communicative and professional [perspectives], all of which are intertwined in a continuously changing media environment” (García Avilés, meier, Kaltenbrunner, Carvajal, & Kraus, 2009, p.286). Although not an entirely new phenomenon, convergence has become over the past decade the object of a growing body of international research, especially regarding its impact on conventional journalistic practices. It is now a sort of shorthand for the mass media’s response to the challenge of the digital multimedia environment, and it raises many questions in terms of journalistic rules and routines, public policy, and democratic practice.

the early millennium heralded a new age of media concentration and the dawn of convergence in Canada. Between July and November 2000, Canwest Global, Quebecor, and Bell Globemedia (later renamed CTVglobemedia) combined major newspaper, television, and Internet properties under one corporate umbrella in hopes of “reaggregating media fragments” in order to create profit-generating synergies (Goldstein, 2002; also see Pitts, 2002).

these mergers raised concerns as to the potential negative impact of convergence on information diversity and content control (Shade, 2005; Winseck, 2008). the Standing Senate Committee on transport and Communications reported these concerns, but also more favourable views, in its *Interim Report on the Canadian News Media* (Canada, 2004). the Senate Committee noted as well the dearth of evidence presented to support the idea that convergence had actually reduced the diversity of content in Canadian media. more recently, George (2007) argued the need for attentive and ongoing study of individual cases of ownership consolidation, specifically regarding cross-ownership and convergence practices.

With the goal of starting to fill this empirical void in the Canadian context, we conducted a comparative content analysis study¹ in 2007. our specific objective was to assess the relative similarity of content produced by flagship newspapers and prime-time television news programs in the major cross-owned media groups (Canwest, Quebecor, and CTVglobemedia), compared with that of CBC, radio-Canada, and newspapers in major Canadian markets (table 1)². By pairing news items on the same topic

Table 1: National media studied

| CTVglobemedia | Canwest Global | Quebecor |
|---|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| TV: “CTV News” | TV: “Global National” | TV: “TVA réseau” |
| Print: <i>Globe and Mail</i> | Print: <i>National Post</i> | Print: <i>Journal de Montréal</i> |
| Control Group (English) | | Control Group (French) |
| TV: “The National” (CBC) | | TV: “Le Téléjournal”(SRC) |
| Print: <i>Winnipeg Free Press, Chronicle-Herald</i> | | Print: <i>La Presse, Le Devoir</i> |

among the cross-owned test groups and the control groups, we were able to examine the extent of shared information within similar story pairs. Aspects of content studied included story leads, story dimensions, language, sources, and editorial “spin.”

the results of our paired-analysis study failed to confirm the hypothesis that significant informational convergence had occurred in any of our cross-owned test groups (Brin, 2008; Brin & Soderlund, 2008; miljan, 2008; miljan, Hildebrandt, & Soderlund, 2009). While some story comparisons yielded statistically significant results, in some of these cases the greater similarity was seen among story pairs in the control groups. In any event, on close examination of “very similar” story pairs, we were unable to document that content appearing in these cases had been shared.³ In fact, most similarities in content were traced to the use of wire service material, chiefly from the Canadian Press (see Clarke, 2005). This said, at a minimum, the study serves as a benchmark for a time when media convergence was in its infancy in Canada.⁴ our findings are consistent with international research on early newsroom convergence initiatives (summarized in Quandt & Singer, 2009), which point to resistance of journalists and the structural differences between print and broadcast media as the most visible obstacles to multiplatform integration. Thus, while media owners such as Leonard Asper (2001) may have dreamt of journalists being able to work in different platforms, there appears to have been considerable reluctance on the part of journalists themselves to accommodate this dream, as well as the constraint of differing journalistic practices and cultures of television and print. more specifically in the Québec context, the mandated regulatory separation of newsrooms at Quebecor, in addition to restrictive union contracts in place at the time, appears to have impeded the implementation of convergence practices.

Building on these initial results, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with media stakeholders between may 2009 and February 2010 to gather their views on our paired-analysis findings, the current situation, and the future of newsroom convergence. We interviewed 17 people in total, including eight media executives from all groups studied and nine journalists, analysts, regulators, educators, and labour leaders. Eight of the participants were from Québec, eight from English Canada, and one from the United States. Although this small sample is by no means representative of the diversity of opinions held on these issues, we were able to observe some areas of consensus and difference—with the most apparent of these differences emerging between respondents from English Canada and Québec.

Interview highlights⁵

None of the respondents were surprised by our findings; indeed, most considered television–print content convergence not to have happened. A senior media executive to whom we spoke offered the opinion that not only were the “assumptions going into convergence over-sold, [they] didn’t materialize” (personal communication, September 22, 2009). Several reasons were mentioned for this, including resistance on the part of journalists and a “silo mentality” on the part of producers and editors (personal communication, September 16, 2009), but also inherent difficulties in merging two very different styles of journalism. regulatory prohibitions and restrictive union agreements were mentioned to explain the absence of convergence practices at

Quebecor, and doubts were raised as to the actual efforts made to integrate news production at Canwest. While it was acknowledged that Canwest print and tV platforms were encouraged to “work on projects that made sense” (such as promotions) and “work together to see what [they could] do,” there was “no specific direction” with respect to sharing of content (personal communication, August 27, 2009).

Some respondents pointed out that an overall lack of diversity in news may be due to factors other than cross-ownership: the use of Canadian Press (CP) content, the fact that journalists covering the same beat work in close proximity, or these journalists’ similar socio-economic backgrounds. one journalist suggested that “the media in general tend to cover the same news stories, and in the same way” (personal communication, June 22, 2009), while a regulator offered that “cross-ownership has no impact on editorial content” (personal communication, october 1, 2009).

Not surprisingly, we found a high level of uncertainty as to the continued viability of the business model in place for both conventional television and print news, although no one saw the situation as catastrophic; in fact, most painted a picture of conditions that were better than one might have expected. In the words of one editor, it was “an exciting time to be in the business” (personal communication, August 26, 2009). there was also a consensus as to the necessity of meeting the challenges of Internet—chiefly that of how to make online products profitable.

Some interviewees were more pessimistic or suggested that media companies had not been particularly innovative until now in meeting this challenge: one publisher stated that “people are just not attending [to news]” and that the industry especially needed “to understand how people use media” (personal communication, September 1, 2009). A labour leader noted that “in a period of rapid change people fear for survival ... [and as a consequence] ... make bad decisions” (personal communication, September 3, 2009).

others interviewed were enthusiastic about recent developments and especially about the potential of new applications to support and enhance conventional journalism. An editor observed that “the web allows the newspaper to play to the strengths of both hard copy and online. It gives the paper [in its hard copy format] greater visibility and opens a whole new audience to the paper” (personal communication, August 26, 2009). An executive commended newspapers for “[no longer] holding back content to appear in the printed version of the paper” and saw an advantage in using websites “to push people to watch conventional tV news” (personal communication, Aug. 27, 2009).

Despite this relative optimism, several interviewees anticipated further reductions in staff and newspaper size, as well as the possibility that newspapers would become smaller and abandon their daily print edition in a more or less distant future.

there was also a consensus that “multitasking” and multiple skill sets were a requirement for future journalists. one editor mentioned hiring at least one new reporter based on her skill in photography and “comfort in standing in front of a video camera,” adding that skill in storytelling remained the highest priority (personal communication, August 24, 2009). Although several media executives stressed that it would be unrealistic and perhaps not even desirable to require all journalists to

develop these skills, it was expected that future hires (“digital natives”) would be more comfortable in a multiplatform environment.

the emergence of the corporate news service model at Canwest and Quebecor (both having decided to leave the Canadian Press) was also a recurring theme in our interviews. It appeared that for these companies, sharing content with competitors outweighed the advantages of being part of the co-op. According to one editor, the expansion of the Canwest News Service in 2007 was seen to have resulted from the recognition on the part of management that its print and broadcast properties “had more or less continued to do what they had done previously” (personal communication, August 24, 2009). thus the corporate news service was seen as a new way of achieving cost savings through sharing of content. others felt that Canwest in particular did not want to share its content with competitors via CP.

Quebecor’s news service, QmI Agency, was created in the fall of 2008, just a few months before the lockout at *Le Journal de Montréal* on January 23, 2009, with the media company pulling out from CP as of July 1, 2010. It was explained to us that QmI would become a decentralized structure of content-sharing across all Quebecor news operations, based on areas of local expertise. Selling ad space for several platforms at once (economies of scale) and integrated diversification, with the more profitable holdings (Vidéotron) subsidizing the less profitable (Sun media), were described as chief advantages of this model (personal communication, February 15, 2010).

Based on these developments, one editor expressed concern as to the future of CP and the potential diminution of a “strong national voice,” as individual newspapers add content to the newswire as well as take stories from it (personal communication, August 24, 2009). other respondents were more confident it would remain a viable and important Canadian news source. A publisher believed that “CP will survive,” but that “its co-op piece will be smaller,” with its chief function being “a tip service for breaking news” (personal communication, September 1, 2009). A labour leader was of the opinion that CP would emerge as “the last true information-provider standing” (personal communication, September 3, 2009).

Another view expressed by several respondents was that content-sharing could be counterproductive from a business perspective and that content differentiation could provide a competitive advantage. According to one executive, “the context of news is more demanding than it was five or ten years ago. you have to allocate resources to produce a different type of coverage” (personal communication, February 15, 2010). It was agreed that newspapers in particular had to focus on exclusive content that would be valuable to the public, and that this would require additional investments. As for the type of content, different options were explored, with local news, investigation, and commentary being the most frequently mentioned.

Finally, there was widespread concern among our respondents that job cuts had reduced to near-critical levels the ability of Canadian media to gather news in a responsible way.

Some feared the potential effect of newsroom staff cuts on the long-term value of the news product in a highly competitive media environment. It was noted that depth

of coverage had been lost, the present challenge being to reinvest in high-quality content even as revenues decline.

Points of divergence

the most apparent divergence in our interview material was in the very different perceptions of convergence between Québec and English Canada. First, Québec-based respondents noted the regulatory and union barriers to convergence as of 2007—the former having been removed by the *CrtC* in 2008, and the latter still undetermined (as these lines are written, the labour dispute at *Le Journal de Montréal* remains unresolved).

one journalist from Québec stated that the union had perhaps shown a lack of foresight by blocking convergence completely and could have tried harder “to make it work—to do convergence right—rather than just close the door completely. that was back in 2004–2005, during the first season of *Star Académie*. Since then, the situation has just gotten worse” (personal communication, June 6, 2009). A Québec-based regulator asserted that joint newsgathering actually made sense and deplored the lack of innovative spirit in the Québec media industry: “[t]here is an aversion to risk, a precautionary principle which isn’t necessarily a good thing for journalism” (personal communication, October 1, 2009). Further, the overall outlook was much more critical, especially regarding Québec, although the journalists we spoke to did express some enthusiasm regarding possible benefits of convergence.

the concerns were twofold regarding Québec specifically. First, journalists were considered to be under great pressure to promote Québec’s entertainment products—it was noted that if we had included the arts and entertainment section in our content analysis, the results may have been quite different. one journalist offered that in Pierre Karl Péladeau’s view, “all Québec entities are at the service of the corporation, including journalists. He expects [them] to promote recording artists and films promoted or distributed by Québec companies, and these are in fact heavily covered in *Le Journal de Montréal* and on *tVA*” (personal communication, June 6, 2009).

Second, it was feared that the creation of *QmI* and the restructuring of *Sun* media and *tVA* would lead to a centralization of editorial control. According to one journalist, “they’ve doubled the size of higher-level management and reduced positions at the editor level. Decisions will be made at a more corporate level and there will be little or no local power, which now acts as a buffer between journalists and corporate pressures” (personal communication, June 6, 2009).

Some respondents also mentioned the sharing of content within the *Gesca* chain and between *radio-Canada*’s television, radio, and Web platforms, as well as collaboration between *radio-Canada* and *Gesca*, as undesirable forms of convergence.

respondents from English Canada, especially media executives, seemed somewhat more pragmatic and optimistic, expressing hope and enthusiasm for the potential of reinventing the business. they were also uncomfortable with the idea of state intervention, while government’s role as a regulator was given greater prominence in Québec. to some extent, attitudes in English Canada appear closer to those of news

leaders in the United States, as indicated by the results of a recent survey (Pew research Center, 2010).

Toward a model or models of convergence?

Based on individual and comparative case studies in the U.S. and Europe, some scholars have attempted to categorize convergence practices into models. Dailey, Demo, & Spillman's (2005) "convergence continuum" is presented as a "dynamic model that defines news convergence as a series of behavior-based activities" (p. 150), from the minimal practice of cross-promotion to the fully integrated multiplatform newsroom. García Avilés et al. (2009) suggest an approach based on professional considerations, rather than strictly physical or strategic ones. Their matrix model includes three ideal types of convergence: full integration, cross-media convergence, and coordination of isolated platforms. Finally, Gestin, Gimbert, Le Cam, rodhomme-Allègre, rochard, romeyer and ruellan (2009) stop short of elaborating a convergence model based on a series of case studies in France, stating that practices are still at the early stages of experimentation. This observation appears closest to the current situation in Canada.

Canadian media convergence: A moving target

After unsuccessful attempts to achieve cross-media cost savings, Canadian cross-owned media companies turned to within-media cost savings by proceeding to large-scale staff reductions, the same strategy used by media companies not involved in print/television cross-ownership. In the past year, some media companies have initiated modular to full integration or have focused their efforts on sustaining a relationship with a smaller but more engaged audience. In a companion paper in this section, renaud Carbasse examines alternative revenue strategies currently being explored for news websites.

the future of the corporate news service model remains uncertain, especially with the break-up of Canwest and CtVglobemedia, but also because of the continuing labour struggles at Quebecor. the recent announcement of Quebecor's plan for a news/talk television channel, Sun tV News, was received by some as further cause for concern, especially because of the close ties between the managers of the proposed new channel and the federal governing party (Baillargeon, 2010; Kheiriddin, 2010).

Are the Canadian media rising to the challenge to innovate in a context of crisis? the answer to this question depends on whom you ask. today's successes might be tomorrow's bankruptcies and vice versa (Waddell, 2009). In terms of public policy, the focus may shift from limiting cross-ownership (Canadian radio-television and telecommunications Commission, 2008) to sustaining an innovative and democratically relevant news ecosystem, in which the future role of conventional mass media may be no longer to provide news, but rather to direct "the social flow of information and public debate" (Bardoel, 1996, p. 283; see also Deuze, 2009). Indeed, their gate-keeping and agenda-setting roles have already been contested by the fragmentation of audiences and the expansion of information providers, as well as easier access to publication (Quandt & Singer, 2009).

Finally, it is clear to us that this complex and rapidly changing situation must con-

tinue to be closely and independently monitored. This study is a step in that direction—a challenge that we hope other Canadian scholars will take up as well.

Notes

1. the authors wish to thank Lydia Miljan and Kai Hildebrandt for their collaboration and to express our gratitude to the Social Sciences and Humanities research Council of Canada for funding this study. of course, we thank all of those associated with Canadian media for sharing their views with us.
2. Canwest local market television and newspaper platforms in Edmonton, Alberta, were also studied, and for that comparison Global Edmonton's "the News Hour" was paired with its *Edmonton Journal*.
3. In both national and local studies, only one case of clear content-sharing was discovered. that story, dealing with a used car scam, originated with Edmonton Global's *News Hour*, was picked up by Canadian Press, and then run in the *Edmonton Journal* (See Hildebrandt, et al., 2009).
4. In attempting to assess the general applicability of these findings, we must first acknowledge that content-sharing might well have been more likely to occur in the context of election campaign coverage. We had indeed made plans to add two weeks of election coverage to our sample if a federal election had been called in 2007. In spite of intense speculation, a federal election did not take place until the fall of 2008, well beyond the time during which we were collecting data. thus the possibility remains that for selected events such as elections, the barriers to multi-tasking journalists may be less robust, and consequently more shared content would appear. While we must leave this question to future research, we reiterate our major finding that as of 2007, content sharing among television and newspaper properties of major Canadian media corporations was certainly not an established practice and, as a senior television news editor told us in an e-mail, these "findings are as we might have expected" (Email correspondence, 2009, Sept. 15). A Quebec newspaper executive likewise agreed that our results reflected the situation with respect to content-sharing in 2007. He also indicated that had the study been done in 2009 there would have been similar findings, but that by 2011, there would perhaps be significantly more content-sharing: his view was that "change is coming, but not yet" (Interview, June 17, 2009. translated by the lead author).
5. respondents are not identified to ensure confidentiality. Quotes from French-language interviews were translated by the lead author.

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