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Insights from a Comparative Study into Convergence Culture in European Newsrooms

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KEYWORDS Comparative quantitative survey; convergence culture; cross-media; editorial routines; European journalism; newsroom strategies; transmedia

Convergence has had a major influence on journalism in the past decade. It is particularly important to understand how convergence continues to change working conditions as well as the journalistic practices, routines, norms, and strategies that shape news production. This phenomenon becomes even more substantial when considering the extent to which technological and economic changes have had a disruptive impact on journalism, altering how news is produced and circulated to increasingly fragmented audiences (Picard 2014; Spyridou et al. 2013). Under these ever-changing conditions, journalism must adapt to alterations resulting from convergence processes in order to remain a relevant authority on information and orientation in a digital media environment increasingly populated by non-journalistic actors, who compete for the “collection, filtering, and distribution of news information” (Lewis 2012, 838).

Background: How Does Convergence Culture Challenge Journalism?

In our article, we aimed to investigate how local/regional newspapers in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Spain, and Portugal have strategically adjusted their editorial practices in light of what Jenkins (2006) called contemporary “convergence culture.” This culture is not only defined by the ongoing global technological convergence of media platforms and technologies, but also “represents a society-wide cultural shift affecting audiences, media and corporations” (Jenkins 2006, 3). For journalists, this means thinking

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and acting in terms of a profound connectedness of the communication and channels employed to disseminate content. Therefore, we conclude:

To understand the dynamics of convergence processes, it is necessary to understand convergence not just as a specific way of producing and distributing news, but as a result of a cultural reconfiguration in newsrooms based on strategies facilitating or impeding their implementation. (Menke et al. 2018, 882)

Literature Review: What Do We Know from Previous Research?

In the academic literature on convergence in journalism, few national, comparative studies focusing on prestigious news outlets using ethnographic methods, i.e., mainly observations and interviews, prevail (e.g., Egli von Matt 2009; García-Avilés, Kaltenbrunner, and Meier 2014; Larrondo et al. 2014). Regarding European countries, thus far, only one survey has collected data that has allowed for estimations about quantitative distributions with respect to journalists' attitudes, routines, and practices (Fortunati et al. 2009).

The main focus of these existing inquiries was on examining how structures in European newsrooms have changed to meet the requirements for producing and distributing news for several channels, such as print, news websites, and social media. The results of the studies—mostly conducted in Spain, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and the United Kingdom—show that journalism is moving toward convergence by implementing integrated newsrooms, producing content for several channels, and engaging in cross-distribution. Ten years ago, Quandt and Singer (2009) came to the conclusion that “journalism organizations are reconfiguring or even reinventing themselves as multimedia companies” (141). However, coordinating the different journalistic cultures of print, online, and broadcast channels is still regarded as a challenge, even though the attitude of journalists about participating in change has been generally positive (Menke et al. 2018, 883–886).

Based on their empirical findings, several journalism researchers developed models in the past to explain the different levels of adaption to convergence in newsrooms:

- (1) The *convergence continuum* model, for example, indicates the degree of convergence in a newsroom, varying from the minimum level of cross-promoting content on different platforms to the maximum of full convergence, depending on how cooperatively journalists work in newsrooms (Dailey, Demo, and Spillman 2005).
- (2) In a similar way, a *matrix model of convergence* was introduced to differentiate between full integration, cross-media, and the coordination of isolated platforms and the ways in which these forms of convergence affect the four areas of project scope, newsroom management, journalistic practices, and work organization (García Avilés et al. 2009).
- (3) A broader approach was employed by the *index of convergence*. It identified four dimensions to determine the level of convergence of a media outlet: integrated production, multi-platform delivery, multi-skilled professionals, and an active audience (Domingo et al. 2007; Gago et al. 2009).

An important conclusion that can be drawn from the extant empirical results and analytical approaches is that there is no one ideal state of convergent journalism, but

rather that each media outlet and newsroom must adapt to convergence depending on their individual culture, circumstances, and strategic goals, e.g., a national newspaper with a solid workforce and proper revenue has more options to implement a convergence culture than a regional and less influential newspaper. Hence, how to adapt to new circumstances affecting different outlets in often dissimilar ways is a strategic as well economic decision. Following Deuze (2004), we would therefore argue that “convergence turned out to be a non-linear and messy process that is consequently in motion but not always towards the ideal of convergent journalism on all levels at the same time” (Menke et al. 2018, 883).

Our Study: How Did We Research Convergence Culture in European Newsrooms?

For our study, we approached journalists in managerial positions at newspaper outlets in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Spain, and Portugal. For each outlet, we contacted the journalists responsible for the convergence strategy and were able to obtain 228 completed questionnaires (DE: 81, NL: 25, CH: 18, AT: 12, ES: 42, PT: 50). For further information on the method, sampling and measures, see Menke et al. (2018, 887–890).

Our goal was to identify differences between the six countries regarding the working conditions in the newsrooms, the attitudes of the journalists, and the subsequent strategies employed to implement convergence culture in the newsroom. This entailed an inquiry into (1) strategic approaches, (2) coordination, policies, and editorial routines, (3) content production, and (4) journalistic skills and motivation. Along these dimensions, we posed five guiding research questions in our article (Menke et al. 2018, 890–898).

Findings: What is the Take-Away?

Below, we present our research questions and a summary of the key findings as a take-away from our study.

Is a strategic shift from print to convergence culture evident in European newsrooms?

Our results show that a shift from print to convergence culture is occurring, but it is still skewed toward print. However, a hybrid newsroom culture is developing, one which is increasingly incorporating convergence; that said, newsrooms must be able to translate convergence from the strategic level to applicable procedures and policies within their editorial departments. As we know from previous research, restructuring long-established routines is a challenging task, one that involves changing deeply rooted newsroom cultures to motivate journalists and encourage them to think in terms of convergence across the boundaries of accustomed media outlets.

Is convergence journalism institutionalized in the working routines of European newsrooms?

Results from the first research question indicate that profoundly rooted aspects, such as channel priorities and time allocation, tend to follow the dominant print culture. In the case of working routines, we observed a different picture, one in which specific convergence projects are embedded in institutionalized routines for cross-media reporting

and coordination. Additionally, implemented daily routines and, in some countries, social media policies guide the journalists' everyday work. This disparity between print-oriented time and channel priorities and comparably well-implemented convergence working routines is not surprising, since certain practices are easier to implement than others: Some practices may demand a profound change of newsroom culture, whereas others may require only a small adjustment in their workflows.

Are new potentials of content production strategically fostered in European newsrooms?

New potentials of content production (such as optimization of content for all channels, a focus on audio-visual content, and transmedia storytelling) are fostered in European newsrooms, yet differences are evident in the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal, where more diverse and elaborated approaches to convergence journalism are employed.

Are journalists strategically encouraged to join convergence developments in European newsrooms?

Overall, editorial departments rely on the journalistic skills of their staff, and thereby, as asked in RQ4, they do indeed strategically encourage their staff to join convergence developments. Strategies meant to encourage journalists seem to positively affect their motivation in all European newsrooms. Even though journalists may often be resistant to change, we found a general sense of optimism toward engaging with new technologies and formats. Nevertheless, additional training is perceived to be an essential feature for successfully implementing convergence culture. Age also plays a role: Older editors are more reluctant to embrace convergence developments.

Do Mediterranean newsrooms differ from those in North/Central European countries in their strategic approaches to convergence culture?

European newsrooms are still following the logic of the print culture and, especially in North/Central Europe, the shift to convergence culture has been impeded by a long and strong tradition of print journalism. Spain and Portugal, however, show more diverse strategic approaches when it comes to adapting to the possibilities of new media environments. They not only implement new editorial routines with more effort but also make use of new formats and transmedia storytelling.

In general, the findings show that a well-established print culture has a significant influence on the openness toward changes leading to convergence culture and its subsequent implementation, which is why newsrooms in Mediterranean countries, where a strong broadcasting culture prevails, seem to be better equipped to adapt multimedia and convergence workflows than the print-oriented cultures in North/Central Europe. To learn more about the details of the theoretical or methodological background and the specific findings that led us to our conclusions, we encourage our readers to access the full article online.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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