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Convergence and Divergence

Jane B. Singer

The steadily growing dominance of the internet as a source of information of all kinds will affect print and television journalism differently, I think. Television and online journalism will continue to converge. Print and online journalism will diverge.

In addition to the fact that television is finally set to become a digital medium, online and television journalism share three complementary strengths: immediacy, brevity and visual impact. On the internet, the first two have been evident from the start, though it has taken time for journalistic work routines to adjust.

The medium's visual capabilities were harder to see when transmission, processing and display speeds were slow and, importantly, when internet users lacked the technology to cheaply and easily disseminate their own visual information. Both those hurdles are going or gone, and the online medium is becoming a steadily more visual one.

Although much of that visual content is not journalistic – that is, in the public interest, broadly defined – a growing amount is. As more media organizations reconfigure their newsrooms to facilitate production of content across multiple platforms, journalists are increasingly likely to produce both video- and text-based versions of a story, even if they continue to think of themselves as working for a newspaper or magazine.

Strong visuals are a component of all television journalism, broadcast and cable. The immediacy and brevity of the internet, which demands a steady stream of fresh and easily digestible information, highlight its convergence with cable news in particular. There are two permutations, one connected to news and the other to opinion.

Reporters filing for the internet, regardless of the media platform most closely associated with their employer's "brand," are expected to follow a breaking story much as cable television reporters have done for a generation. Many of those same reporters, especially ones with topical expertise, also will be expected to develop their *own* online brand, comparable to the market-driven personality of television journalists. The blog (or its progeny) will become a significant journalistic branding device, and it will be not just acceptable but desirable for online journalists to have an identifiable viewpoint or "voice," much like the talking heads on cable news channels.

The internet takes to new levels cable's assault on the notion of objectivity as a journalistic virtue. So 20th century, don't you think?

Strict objectivity will fare little better in the surviving print media, I suspect. But its replacement will look rather different, highlighting the second half of my argument: that print and online journalism will diverge.

The core strengths of television align with those of the internet; the core strengths of print do not. The internet is good at long-form, text-based journalism only when that text can be effectively combined with visuals and, typically, with the other core online attribute of interactivity, which is not significantly shared by either print or television journalism. In-depth explorations drawing on all three elements – often along with interactivity's cousins, the ability to personalize and/or contribute to online content -- can be exceptionally powerful. But by themselves, long chunks of online text are terribly hard to get through, both because reading from a screen is tiresome no matter how good the resolution, and because something else always is just begging to be clicked.

Journalism based primarily on the power of words works best, and will continue to work best, on paper. The print medium offers greater legibility and flexibility as well as fewer distractions, inviting relatively slow reading as opposed to relatively quick viewing.

The online journalist is an information provider; the rapidly updating online form of journalism requires adeptness at gathering information quickly, packaging it into easily digestible elements, and disseminating it in a way that maintains a coherent story line. The print journalist is a sense maker, putting the information we've already obtained online into context, exploring it, analyzing it, and explaining its relevance.

It bears emphasizing that I am not talking about different people here. I am talking about different forms of journalism – different outputs for different media platforms. The investigative reporter, for instance, may break a story online, post a blog item about the process of reporting it, and write an analytical print piece exploring its implications. Perhaps other elements will be added to create an interactive multimedia package, too. That sounds like a great deal of work, and it is. There is likely to be more work for journalists in the future, but unlikely to be more employed journalists to do that work. My point here, however, is that what appears online and what appears in print will continue to diverge in line with the respective strengths of the different media forms.

Postscript: I have tried to avoid attaching value judgments to the media convergence and divergence envisioned in this essay, but I will conclude with a warning. Analytical journalism is expensive to produce – and inevitably, it also will be expensive to consume. It demands considerable cognitive effort to read, and most people, most of the time, will not choose to make that effort. The print audience will be small in size relative to the increasingly massive online one, a trend that is already apparent – too small to sustain the centuries-old business model of selling mass audiences to advertisers. Some number of newspapers will cease to exist in print form, and others will cease to exist at all – another trend that is easy to spot. Those that remain will not be cheap. A crucial issue will be whether the revenue they can generate will cover the

costs of producing them, let alone return media organizations to levels of profitability that they will find acceptable.

Issues of cost, quality and media diversity all have profound implications for large-scale democratic societies. If high-caliber journalism manages to survive, but in a form only accessible to a small and well-heeled audience, the net result obviously will be to exacerbate troubling gaps in civic knowledge and engagement. If it does not survive, we have even bigger problems.