Digital convergence in Ecuadorian media: some strengths and weaknesses

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Abstract. Convergence in mass media goes beyond the simple integration of the act of production, the usage of multi-media, and remodeling management. It refers to a multi-dimensional process that affects the technological, business, and professional fields, as well as users of mass media, thereby promoting the integration of tools, spaces, work methods, and previously disaggregated languages. Ecuadorian media began to seek convergence in 1998. This article analyzes the state of the art of digital convergence in Ecuador based on two case studies: *El Telégrafo* and *El Universo*. The conclusions of this study stress the need for information provider companies to assume the challenges that are implied in reaching audiences that are becoming more and more diverse.

Key words: integration of media production, convergence, multimedia, mass communication.

1. Introduction

The evolution of ICTs has led to the transformation of information providers. This is mainly due to the phenomenon of technological convergence. The integration of media production, the new models of production routines and journalist profiles, as well as multi-media phenomena, and new media narratives are key factors of this change. Moreover, the increase of access to the Internet, the development of social networks, the role of users as pro-consumers, plus the growing usage of mobile devices and new trends in publicity make the Internet an important tool in mass media analysis.

Consequently, many media operators have to operate within the framework of innovation and openness. In this way, they can better meet the needs of readers, while also seeking new forms of doing business that facilitate the financial sustainability of media companies [11].

This article presents an analysis of the state of the art of digital convergence in Ecuador that is based on two case studies: the national newspapers *El Telégrafo* (public) and *El Universo* (private). Furthermore, it describes the main characteristics of the new consumers of media in Ecuador, as well as the professional challenges of journalists regarding the process of ICTs, and information provider needs. The main conclusions of this study thus serve as a starting point for a more ample study of digital convergence in Ecuador, which are applicable in other contexts.

2. Convergence

According to Ester Appelgren, who is quoted by Moreno [9], it is possible that the first introduction of the concept of convergence was developed by Nicholas Negroponte in 1979, i.e. when he introduced the famous model of convergence that was based on three converging industries: television, radio and cinema. The printing and publicity industry and the computer industry of the time were likewise influential. Ecuadorian media, however, began to seek convergence in 1998. This phenomenon influences other important spheres such as the professional training of journalists, and the re-categorization of the profession, which can only be done with the feedback of actual journalists. Ramón Salaverría et al [18] refer to a process that affects various fields:

> A multi-dimensional focus, which is facilitated by the generalized implementation of digital technologies of telecommunication, affects the technological, commercial, professional and editorial aspects of mass media - thereby promoting an integration of tools, spaces, work methods, and previously disaggregated languages. The journalists elaborate contents that are distributed via multiple platforms, e.g. by means of individual languages.

On the other hand, the technological revolution facilitates "enables modern print media producers to take advantage of new media, which facilitate audio-visual publications and which are potentially, interactive" [1]. At the same time, it motivates the planning of various forms of reaching the public, for example, by means of downloading documents, organizing chats, forums, or permanent updating news, or interactive maps to tell stories. The user exclusively accesses the contents that are of interest to them, thereby personalizing the information channel. All this propitiates change in the dissemination of information products, and consequently the informative business [16].

Within the context of digitalization, it is important to know how experts define convergence. Regarding journalistic convergence, Historian Armando Piñeiro [14] states that: "The convergence of the media involves the organization of the new information companies, which arise from the fusion and the purchase of different media by the same business produced in the decade of the 1980s and the 1990s".

With regard to the above, Néstor García Canclini [3] holds the view that: "…today digital convergence is articulating multimedia integration, which enables us to see and to listen on a mobile, palm-held device, or audio iPhones, or see images, written text, and promote the transmission of data, by taking photographs and videos, saving them, communicating with others, and instantly receiving new ideas". This view is not journalistic, but anthropological.

García Canclini speaks of reception, compared with Salaverría, who prefers the term "production".

For Jenkins [7], media convergence is not only based on the inter-connection of distribution channels, platforms and technologies, but covers an entire process of cultural transformation that affects the way in which mass media are used. In this regard, Lisy Navarro [10] states that the "online newspaper will convert into a form

of communication that encapsulates the written press, the simultaneousness of the radio, and television images".

The sociologist Manuel Castells, who is cited in García de Torres and Pou [4], guarantees that there are indices of a strategy of convergence on behalf of Internet and software companies, and that traditional communication media will be affected by an insufficient bandwidth.

We cannot talk about success or failure of media convergence seeing that this will depend on the vision and strategy of the company that adopts it: integration, interactivity and hyper-mediality [6].

3. Methodology

This research examines digital convergence in Ecuadorian media. For this study, we revised existing literature about the topic, i.e. with the aim of determining the trends that characterize this phenomenon in the country, such as emerging contexts for the management of information. Media professionals thus have before them a vast challenge.

Within this context, two case studies were selected that help to map out the characteristics of media convergence in Ecuador, namely two national newspapers: El Universo www.eluniverso.com and El Telégrafo www.eltelegrafo.com.ec.

For both of these newspapers, we revised their webpages, i.e. given that in this work did not analyze contents, but structures and tools. This revision was carried out during a short period of time. We can also add to this visits to the media providers and interviews with content editors to discover the dynamics of both forms of media related to the process of convergence.

The selection criteria of the media are reliant upon the nature of them. *El Universo* is private and *El Telégrafo* is public. Both are circulated nationally and comprise two of the oldest in the country.

The objective is to influence the trend of the work that is managed by public and private media in the country, as well as to determine the strengths and weaknesses of convergence in the technological, commercial and professional fields.

4. Ecuador on the path towards convergence: a general overview

In the first instance, the network was only used to build presence, that is, where there was a complete 'switch' of the contents in the paper version. This milestone was experienced in the nineties. In 1995, the newspaper *Hoy* published its first online edition.

Between 1997 and 2000, we witnessed a standard growth in online newspapers. Conversely, between 2001 and 2005 no data were recorded. Whereas, for 2006, there were 22 newspapers on the Web. This number was mantained until 2008. From that time until today, the number has increased to 10 daily newspapers.

Box 1: GROWTH OF CYBER-NEWSPAPERS

YEAR	1997	1998	1999	2000	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013

NUMBER OF DAILES	7	9	10	13	22	22	22	29	30	30	31	32

Source: The author with information from the fourth report about Hispanic dailies on the Internet (1997-2000), WAN (2007), with data from 2006 and WAN (2009), with data from 2008.

In second phase, some changes were produced in the content. Thanks to the inclusion of new technology, the image was being adapted to the new environment.

In 2009, *El Universo*, changed its structure and introduced a new image to its readers. Likewise, *online* newsrooms were organized, which involved hiring a different team to the printed press so that it could organize, prepare and publish information on the *Web*.

The same thing happened to *El Telégrafo*, who while renewing their printed editions and after being seized by the State, implemented their *website* and subsequently the applications for mobile devices.

Currently, a vast number of Ecuadorian dailies implemented a model that was more or less integrated among the digital and printed media production companies. In a certain way, they developed models that were adapted to the reality of the environment- i.e. related to the evolution of ICTs.

5.   Case Studies: El Universo and El Telégrafo

El Universo. Founded by Ismael Pérez Pazmiño, its first publication circulated on September 16, 1921. Several years later, in 1957, it was endowed with the slogan "The biggest national daily".

Its institutional website www.eluniverso.com states that the company has evolved as a result of technological and journalistic changes, which has required alterations in its infrastructure. For this reason, the newspaper has been produced in different locations- each of which is adopted to its time and current situation.

El Universo was put online in 1996. At first, only two people were in charge of updating the *website*. Then, there were four. During that same year, the newspaper had no newsroom. With the passage of time, however, small teams were put together. Since January 2011, journalists from the print and digital version have been working in the same physical space, but without incurring the full adoption of a convergence by the media. The Assistant Editor is currently the link between the two editions.

El Universo has been on the Web for 19 years, and is currently published in three different platforms:

1. Websites.
2. Social networks: Facebook www.facebook.com/eluniversoec: 877,039 likes; Twitter: www.twitter.com/eluniversocom: 1,2 M followers; Instagram: https://instagram.com/eluniversocom: 48.9K followers.

The newsroom is comprised of the following: a content editor or chief editor, an assistant editor, eight digital journalists, two videographers, three we developers, a web-master and responsable for Marketing. To this we can add a technical department

that gives maintenance to all the products of *El Universo*, which comprises seven people, five IT staff, and two designers.

The basic characteristics of digital newspapers –namely multimediality, hyper-textuality and interactivity- are moderately developed in *El Universo*, although there is a need to increase an exclusive section for disseminating information in real time, performing live transmissions from news productions or coverage of other media, and online services.

Moreover, it is evident that planning of content was made by thinking about the print editions and not for them and the online platforms, seeing that a great part of the content that is digitally distributed comes from the print publication, while the material is exclusively made for digital platforms is minimal. So, in 2014, only three videos were highlighted in the report of Accountability of *El Universo*[2].

Regarding the model of interactivity, it is found during the stage of initiation. Fewer tools are provided to the user –social networks, forums, and mobile technology testimony (citizen journalism), which have not been fully exploited. The news, which is what readers need to comment upon, are closed to that possibility. The challenge is to seek, through interactive tools, the greatest journalistic advantage possible, and, of course, to pay careful attention to the audience.

As for the business model of this form of media, which Picard [13] describes as the architecture of the product, its services and information flow are necessary for highlighting some of the factors that have obliged media managers to reformulate the strategies, products, and even the contents of their media, especially since late 2009, i.e. when the Government approved a tax reform that included a 12% tax on a newspaper[3].

There are also other measures such as the establishment of a basic salary for communicators and journalists, requirements for the professionalization of journalists, the banning of advertising of products that are considered harmful (junk food, alcohol and tobacco); and the obligation to publish the number of copies that print media sell. All this represents a major blow to the media industry in the country, which has created forced cutbacks, suppressed certain products (media supplements, magazines, etc.), and reduced the circulation of copies, etc.

El Universo, for example, faced heavy criticism and even legal proceedings initiated in 2011 by President Rafael Correa, which was due to a publication of the erstwhile chief columnist of the newspaper, Emilio Palacio, in a column titled: Say no to lies (No a las mentiras), alluding to the Ecuadorian President.

It should be noted that, traditionally, El Universo, joint-stock company, has been one of the biggest newspaper companies of Ecuador. According to the financial report of the Superintendence of Companies of Ecuador (2013), this media recorded losses greater than $ 2 million and a financial profitability of -0.0701[4].

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[2] Retrieved from: http://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2015/03/12/nota/4651466/rendicion-cuentas-wwweluniversocom?src=portada on November 15, 2015

[3] Retrieved from: http://www.eluniverso.com/2009/12/04/1/1356/aprobado-iva-papel-periodico.html on November 13, 2015.

[4] Retrieved from: http://www.supercias.gov.ec/consultas/inicio.html?height=578#, on November 14, 2015.

In spite of this, an effort is evidenced by digital publications through its *Web* site, which, according to the ranking www.alexa.com, the *El Universo* website is in seventh place of the most visited sites in the country[5].

This is because 46% of digital users visit the Websites of newspapers, and the newspapers represent 6% of total Internet visits, 0.8% of pages viewed and 1.1% of the total time spent on digital platforms, according to World Press Trends in its report of 2014[6].

Within this context, *El Universo* has made changes to the infrastructure and tries to position themselves on the network either through their website or in their social networks. For this, a description of their activities is included on its webpage, and the potential benefits for users and sources of income of which their budgets are supplemented. The business then begins to become increasingly complex-despite innovation, the main income still comes from the sale of copies and print advertising.

El Telégrafo. Founded in Guayaquil on February 16, 1884. It was given this name because Ecuador had access to the telegraph service that year, and was the first newspaper in the country to use that invention.

In 2007, the newspaper, which was on the verge of bankruptcy, was seized by the Ecuadorian State, and a new phase commenced by becoming the first public newspaper in the country. By 2014, more than 50% of the shares of the company belonged to the National Government at the Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Society.

Its website www.telegrafo.com.ec has an average of 1,057,916 visits per month[7]. During an interview Gissel Hidalgo, editor in charge of the Web, says that the work done by the media is not only directed to the website, but also to mobile devices such as iPhone, Android, or Ipads. In that sense, during the last year 4070 applications were downloaded from *El Telégrafo*, 1,718 of which were performed on iPads and 2352 were performed on Android systems.

Social networks: Facebook: www.facebook.com/diarioeltelegrafo that registers a total of 42.919 "likes"; Twitter: @el_telegrafo with 23K followers; Youtube: www.youtube.com/eltelegrafoec con 1.665 subscribers

In terms of structure, this form of media is distributed as follows: a general editor-in-chief, a web platform editor, newspaper operators, promoter of social networks. The digital version of *El Telégrafo* has eight digital journalists in Guayaquil, i.e. where the headquarters of the general management of all digital content is located. While in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, four journalists are responsible for the coverage along with a photojournalist with specific functions that are also in charge of the videos: editing, the written segment of each video, etc.

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[5] Retrieved from: http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/www.eluniverso.com, on November 15, 2015.

[6] Information retrived from: http://www.wan-ifra.org/reports/2015/10/01/world-press-trends-report-2015, el 14 de noviembre de 2015.

[7]   Retrieved   from   the   Report   of   Accountability   El   Telégrafo http://www.telegrafo.com.ec/rendicion-cuentas/internas/interior.html?menu=1.3, on November 11, 2015.

El Telégrafo participates with a minimum percentage in the sale of copies, an is subsidized. Even though, it registered losses of more than $ 400,000 in 2013[8].

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However, this media has a multimedia section, which, although limited to videos, is in considerable number, and are highlighted to amplify information about a theme. Specific sections are observed for photos, infographs, maps, and others.

In as far as the business model, we did not observe personal services for digital users such as live spaces in the writing, supplements, and services that facilitate interaction with the user, more than social networks, which are not located in the media's website. Based on the above, one can say that this diary financially depends on the printed version of *El Telégrafo*. For this reason, specific contents are not being created for the digital user.

Comparing the characteristics of *El Telégrafo* with those of *El Universo*, it is seen that the former is more behind than the latter since there is no integration of newsrooms as such. An example of this is that each one has its own editor. On the other hand, it continues prioritizing the printed version, the contents of which are then reproduced on digital platforms such as websites and social networks.

5.1 International models of convergence

The panorama of digital convergence has motivated the creation of specialized cyber-media with a great emphasis on the participation of users, the integration of news items, innovation in the productive routine, and the incorporation of multimedia resources, among other factors.

Within this context, the General Media Group in Tampa, United States comprises an interesting model of a fusion of digital media writing, which was implemented in 2000. Another model that is highlighted in the United States is The *Washington Post*, which, by means of a project of integration, gathered its printed and digital media in one space.

Other dailies such as *The Times*, *Financial Times*, *The New York Times* and *USA Today* have also integrated their copywriting by taking advantage of the resources that both the written and digital platforms offer.

On the other hand, media such as *http://jn.sapo.pt/paginainicial*; *http://www.nytimes.com* and *www.elpais.com*, renewed their products between 2007 and 2008 – providing a great boost to the participation of the users- a strategy that has significantly grown since 2009.

In the Latin American context, we can highlight the examples of *El Tiempo* from Colombia, *El Comercio* de Perú, *La Nación* from Argentina and *El Mercurio* de Chile as initiators of the process of convergence- achieving notable success.

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8 Información recuperada de: http://www.supercias.gov.ec/consultas/inicio.html?height=578#, el 15 de noviembre de 2015.

5.2 The new consumer

The increase of digital media in Ecuador is due to greater access to IVTs, plus the low costs of connection, and citizens that need to be informed and communicated to in not only national territory, but also in other geographical spheres [2].

"In the case of the Internet, there is a certain paradox with respect to the recipients of the information. On the one hand, there is the possibility of feedback   by the users, which enables the author and the media provider to know better their receptors, to know instantly what they think and feel, and what their queries, preferences, and opinions are. On the other hand, the telematics networks convert the users in a universal auditorium. The message may be distributed, received, and frequently answered at any time and from any place"[5].

Taking as a basis this citation, we can see that today the participation of the user in digital mass media is permanent. This does not occur in traditional media, which could make it restricted per se-such as by sending letters to readers, for example.

For Howard Rheingold, who is cited in Pisani and Piotet [15], the main tools of participation in media are: *blogs*, wikis, RSS, *tagging*, social *bookmarking*, sites to share photos, videos or music, *mashups*, *podcasts*, *moblogs,* and others. These tools were consolidated in 2005 with the *Web* 2.0 concept, and enable the user not only to receive information, but also to exchange ideas.

There are various types of interactivity. Alain Lelu and Jean-Claude Marcovici, as cited in Rost [17], highlight two types of interactivity. However, these are centered on communicative interactivity, which coincides in part with these authors. Bretz, for example, speaks about an interactivity between individuals (communicative interactivity), but makes an additional observation in distinguishing two grades of interactivity: one completely interactive and another one mildly interactive.

5.3 Professional Challenges

The demands of media communication are now different to those that we used to have, says José Rivera Costales[9], a multimedia journalist from Ecuador. He added that it is not only necessary to know how to redact a journalistic piece, to design a webpage, or write a news article for the radio and to present it, or to do a report, or prepare a news item for television, but it is also about managing hyper-textuality, multi-mediality, interactiveness, and, above all, those which are promoted by the participation of the users, which have made the media open their eyes to this new communication market.

Additionally, a contemporary journalist should be familiarized with cloud-based computing since they are not just tied to a computer; that mobility is basic at that moment. "It is not that important to know whether in the future these had fused completely –giving rise to a new electro-domestic product, but rather think that convergence is operating in a diverse manner: we used various apparatus to satisfy our desire for information, communication, education, and pastime according to the circumstances and needs" [12].

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[9] Personal interview with José Rivera Costales

In this sense, it is important to highlight that we are facing a situation in which power is in the user's hands, as well as how they consume information and how the time of profession itself is, compared with those that the media require as training for their journalists, and to incorporate within their companies people who are capable of meeting the needs of the users, and converting them in actions and services in the media, Meyer [8] explains it as follows: "In the same way that the development of modern agriculture led to a demand in variety in processed food, the era of information created a demand for processed information. We need someone who places it in a context, who gives it a theoretical framework, and suggests ways of using it".

Within the context of users, it is important to mention the young public (digital natives), whom, based on their particular characteristics, prefer the consumption of digital media. This implies arduous processes of innovation in media companies, which range from the incorporation of multi-tasking journalists to the creation of sections and contents capable of capturing the audience. However, one should not forget the big audience mayor, which has maintained their fidelity to printed media for several years, and which have the greatest capacity of consumption. This implies the segmentation of audiences with individual contents for each one.

6. Conclusions

La convergence of editorials is a means, not an end. The challenge is, on the one hand, in the training of journalists, and on the other, in the capacity of media companies to assume the challenges that implies meeting audiences with more and more diverse needs.

It could be said that there does not exist an ideal model of convergence, which may be assumed in a general way by all the communication media, given that within its design, the following should be taken into account: the social, economic, political and technological context in which the media are developed, which underscore the trends and needs – both the media and the audiences

The cases that have been analyzed, namely *El Telégrafo* and *El Universo*, are a sign of the   integration of newsrooms implies the development of efficient mechanisms in the management of contents, but apart from this, they help to recognize that it is necessary to expand the gamut of services and products aimed at audiences with different needs, because beyond the new structuralization or organization of physical spaces, convergence implies a change of mentality of those who deal with media companies and wish to be part of this great challenge

Both *El Universo* and *El Telégrafo* as a strength of its printed version is that which leads its business models.

The business models of digital media should not only be concerned about creating vast quantities of products and services, but also the quality of these, and that can be adjusted to the needs of the public.

Finally, it is up to Ecuadorian media to describe and innovate the tools for the creation of contents, and take maximum advantage of the latest generation technology. Within this context, it is necessary for mobile technology to be developed and include as an additional element of the work of newspaper newsrooms- namely

that which we should add professional convergence, which helps to innovate the journalistic exercise.

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