Media convergence and its public policy impact

Media Standards Trust submission to the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications Inquiry on media convergence

Submission on behalf of the Media Standards Trust by Dr. Gordon Neil Ramsay, Research Fellow and Dr. Martin Moore, Director.

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1. The Media Standards Trust (MST) is an independent, non-partisan charity (number 1113680) established in 2006 to foster high standards in news on behalf of the public. It does this through research, development and campaigning.


3. The MST has over five years’ experience of developing online tools for the public. In 2008 the MST was the first British winner of a Knight News Challenge award, in partnership with Sir Tim Berners-Lee’s Web Science Trust, to make the provenance of news more transparent on the web.

4. The Trust has built and runs a family of free news accountability services online, for the benefit of the public. Journalisted.com, used by over 100,000 people each month, helps the public answer the question ‘How do I know this journalist knows what they’re writing about?’ Churnalism.com enables people to distinguish journalism from churnalism (PR copy that looks like news). Complaints.pccwatch.co.uk is a searchable database of all formal complaints recorded against UK newspapers since 1996. Unsourced.org (still in alpha development) crowdsources sources of news articles, and allows the public to stick warning labels on news articles (eg. ‘Warning: this article is copy/pasted from a press release’).

5. The MST runs, in association with Political Quarterly, the Orwell Prize for political writing.

6. The MST won a Prospect Think Tank Award in 2011.

Introduction

7. Convergence, as we understand the term, impacts on all the major processes inherent in the media industries: the production of content, its distribution, and its reception by the public. As a result, it has implications for the organisational structures and economics of the UK media industries, and many aspects of regulatory policy concerning ownership, investment, and content standards. Issues that are often overlooked, however, are the impact of convergence on public access to news and information, particularly public interest news, and the public’s ability to find, navigate, verify and assess that information.

8. We anticipate that many of the submissions to this inquiry will be concerned with the economic and regulatory aspects of convergence, particularly in the face of changing competitive pressures on media organisations traditionally operating in the fields of broadcasting and print. Many of these submissions will argue that, as a consequence of convergence, existing regulatory constraints are increasingly anachronistic.

9. In the short space available within this submission, the Media Standards Trust will not add to the many voices concentrating on this aspect of convergence. Rather, this submission will
focus on the impact of convergence on the public, and its consequent implications for public policy.

10. Specifically, this submission will examine four repercussions of convergence which tend to be under-emphasised, despite their implications for democracy and the public sphere:
   i. Public access to – effectively – limitless information and media content
   ii. How the public assesses the trustworthiness of news and information in a converged media world
   iii. How the public distinguishes between news, public relations content, and advertorial
   iv. Public access to news and information in the public interest (particularly at a local and regional level)

11. The purpose of this submission is to introduce these issues, and to illustrate that any public policy initiatives in this area need to balance the commercial arguments about deregulation with the democratic arguments about the adequate provision of news and information to the public.

Public access to limitless information and content

12. The most fundamental aspect of convergence from the public’s perspective is the access to almost limitless information and communication via multiple devices – smart TVs, mobile phones, tablets, consoles, computers – combined with the ability to create, copy and modify content and self-publish through multiple platforms and outlets.

13. This is, undoubtedly, a remarkable and a remarkably positive development. At the same time it has numerous implications for the public and public policy, many of which have yet to be fully considered:

14. **Access to unmediated content:** The public are no longer constrained to accessing information via traditional gatekeepers. They can access information via numerous new digital intermediaries, or can seek out the original raw information or data. For example, in the case of traffic news, less than two decades ago people were restricted to periodic updates via radio and broadcast television. Now, it is possible to access real-time information through live-updates online, live video streaming, or location specific information relayed directly to drivers via digital radio or through satnavs.

15. **Increased importance of new filters:** As the influence of traditional media gatekeepers has declined, so the importance of new digital intermediaries has grown. These intermediaries, such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter, enable the public to find, assess and communicate information and media content. The influence of these ‘new gatekeepers’ on the public’s media consumption is now significant (even separate to their influence on the media industry). Google search, for example, accounts for 91% of all searches in the UK, as compared to 67% of all searches in the US.¹

16. **Access to alternative and traditionally under-represented viewpoints:** There is a hugely enlarged diversity of viewpoints displayed across the digital media environment, which presents a much wider array of voices than could previously be heard. This has certainly created more avenues for public engagement and new public spheres. However, it has also been argued that this has helped to reinforce and encourage mistaken and extreme viewpoints, often unchallenged. For example, 34% of conservative Republicans in the USA

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believe President Obama to be a Muslim, up from 16% in 2008.\textsuperscript{2} Much of this increase has been ascribed to the influence of social media and so-called digital echo chambers.

17. **Ease of re-use of published content:** In a converged media environment it is extremely straightforward to re-use and republish digital information, with implications for information rights, credibility, and sourcing. This can be illustrated by the increasing importance of automated aggregation, such as Google News. In 2010, for example, 45% of referrals to UK newspapers came via Google (including Google News), compared with 31% direct.\textsuperscript{3}

18. **Greater onus on individuals to assess/judge/interpret information:** In a world of virtually limitless information, in the absence of traditional gatekeepers, the individual necessarily has to take on more responsibility for assessing and judging information for themselves. There are currently few tools to help them make this assessment. Moreover, assessing information will become more difficult as the quantity of information increases, and more false information is published. A recent research study estimated that within two years 10-15% of reviews on social media will be fake, paid for by companies.\textsuperscript{4}

19. There has, to date, been only partial public policy consideration given to the shift from an analog world of limited information to a converged digital world of almost limitless information. Yet the implications, certainly for the public, are profound.

**Establishing trustworthiness of news and information content**

20. In a converged world, in which similar information published on multiple platforms and republished (and potentially modified) by innumerable individuals and organisations, it can be hard for the public to assess the trustworthiness of information.

21. This is in large part due to the increasing separation of publication and distribution of news content. There is a growing likelihood that members of the public will consume news content via an outlet that has not itself produced the information (for example, via Facebook).

22. The ease of re-using and re-publishing news and information is now such that many ‘publishers’ do not apply the norms of publishing that developed over the previous century, or that have developed since (e.g. accreditation, verification, sourcing, linking).

23. Increasing quantities of “news” is being published by private companies, NGOs, governments and public authorities, and it is generally unclear to the public what motivations or commercial interests have informed the collection, checking, editing or presentation of this content.

24. Consistent standards for identifying the provenance of news and information, for example through the integration of metadata, have yet to be established in practice or universally accepted by news publishers. The MST learnt this through a two year project – the transparency initiative – that it ran in partnership with Sir Tim Berners-Lee’s Web Science Trust.

25. The lack of consistent provenance information makes it more difficult for the public to interrogate or assess where the information came from, and therefore whether it is trustworthy.

26. Despite the opportunities inherent in converged media to better source news and information (e.g. by hyperlinking), sourcing remains poor and highly inconsistent in most

\textsuperscript{2} The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, \url{http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Little-Voter-Discomfort-with-Romney%E2%80%99s-Mormon-Religion-1.aspx}

\textsuperscript{3} From Paid Content, \url{http://paidcontent.org/2010/06/28/419-interactive-chart-where-uk-newspaper-websites-get-their-traffic/} accessed 26/09/12

\textsuperscript{4} Study by Gartner, September 2012, \url{http://www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=2161315}, accessed 27/09/12
news organisations (it is for this reason that the MST has been developing a new online service – unsourced.org – to crowdsource original sources for news articles.

27. Already difficult, it will become more difficult for the public to establish the trustworthiness of news and information in a converged digital era, unless there is greater consistency in the provision of information regarding provenance, and tools to help the public judge and assess what they read/watch/hear.

Distinguishing between news, public relations content, and advertorial

28. Increasing amounts of commercial content is being published as news. In many cases it is not made transparent to the public what the motivations or commercial interests are behind the information displayed in news content.

29. This situation is exacerbated by economic and commercial pressures acting upon traditional news publishers, where reduction and ‘multi-skilling’ of editorial staff, combined with time pressure and increased publishing space, is leading to the increased use of material produced outside the news organisation, often by communications professionals, but then published as ‘news’.

30. A recent study showed that, at certain UK’s newspapers, only 12% of news stories consisted solely of information gathered and presented by the journalist, while 60% consisted wholly or mainly of wire copy or PR.5

31. Further ongoing evidence, uncovered through the public’s use of churnalism.com, has shown that dozens of articles each day in the national press derive from press releases, without acknowledging their source.

32. The public is therefore subject to a large amount of unadulterated wire copy and press release material, but without any indication that the information they are accessing has not been gathered in accordance with the objective values of journalism. Much of this material is designed to persuade, or to reflect the needs of commercial clients.

33. This is not made transparent, and so the public is at growing risk of mistaking partial commercial communication with journalism.

34. The regulatory impact of this is has already been recognised in other countries. In the US in 2009 the FTC revised its guidelines regarding disclosure of endorsements and testimonials to include elements of new media (for example the endorsement of products on blogs).6

35. In the UK’s converging media environment, without a public policy intervention, the public are likely to find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between news, public relations content and advertorial (e.g. endorsements).

Public Access to news and information in the public interest

36. A direct effect of the increased competitive pressures acting on news publishers as a result of the fragmentation of the digital media environment, and perhaps the defining issue of modern journalism, is the reduction of public interest journalism across all levels – local, regional, national and international.

37. Public interest journalism is costly and time-consuming, but a fundamental part of the quasi-constitutional role of journalism in democratic society. The growth of readily-available PR

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and wire copy, and the explosion of information obtainable from the internet, means that news publishers have less commercial incentive to pursue public interest journalism.

38. A reduction in the amount of genuine journalistic inquiry means a reduction in the amount and quality of information available to the citizens from which they can evaluate public life.

39. At the international level, while much more information is in circulation online, there has been a substantial drop in the amount of resources devoted to international events by the British press. An MST study in 2010 found that foreign news coverage across four UK national newspapers has fallen by 40% since 1979 in absolute terms, and that international news makes up only 11% of the national newspapers studied compared to 20% in 1979.

40. At the local level, local news coverage has been particularly badly hit by economic pressures. Increasing parts of the UK are no longer served by any local or regional newspapers, displaying a growing democratic deficit between the public and the decisions made in their name at the local level. In Port Talbot, where the MST runs a joint research and development project with Cardiff University’s school of journalism, there is now no dedicated local newspaper (the Port Talbot Guardian closed in 2009).

41. In a converged media environment, there will be areas of the UK, and news subjects, which are unprofitable for commercial media organisations to cover. Public policy consideration needs to be given to whether, and how, these geographical and subject areas will be covered in the future.

42. We have not, in this short submission, looked at the repercussions of convergence on media regulation. This is referred to in existing MST reports and is dealt with at more length by Lara Fielden in her 2011 study for the Reuters Institute (‘Regulating for Trust in Journalism: Standards regulation in the age of blended media’).

If you would like any further evidence with respect to the implications of convergence for public policy, written or oral, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

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7 The lead researcher on the project has developed and runs a news site for Port Talbot, the Port Talbot Magnet, and is supported by freelance journalists and volunteers. The South Wales Evenings Post reports from Port Talbot but is not dedicated to covering the town.