

Marius Lifvergren

New Media Theories and Concepts

MS7302

13 December 2010

Task 2

3082 Words

Task 2

Introduction

The aim of this essay is to explain what media convergence is, and why it is important in terms of how it affects the society and its citizens. The first part of the essay is dedicated to the understanding of what media is. Marshall McLuhan's theories will be used as a backdrop in the attempt to disseminate the nature of media, and how it relates to convergence. By tracing media back to the first forms of expression and follow it all the way to the internet, this essay wish to clarify how media converge. The second part of this essay will draw upon the theories from the first part, so to better understand how convergence impacts the society and why it is important. Because the convergence "universe", a term which will be elaborated on later in the essay, is a never ending process and therefore too large and complicated to be explored in detail, this essay will narrow down on those parts of the subject that best explains convergence on a media and society level. Underneath is a short but precise introductory to what media convergence means according to Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 2006):

A word that describes technological, industrial, cultural and social changes in the ways media circulates within our culture. Some common ideas referenced by the term include the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, the search for new structures of media financing that fall at the interstices between old and new media, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of the kind of entertainment experiences they want. Perhaps most broadly, media convergence refers to a situation in which multiple media systems coexists and where media content flows fluidly across them. Convergence is understood here as an ongoing process or series of intersections between different media systems, not a fixed relationship. (p. 282)

What is converging?

The evolution of media stretches over a long period of time, and takes us back to the first cave drawings made by man around 30.000 BC. In the modern world, media is associated with Gutenberg's invention of the movable type, and later on, in the 20th century, the proliferation of the mass media in form of newspapers, radio, film and television. Different mediums have

worked as tools to convey information through space and time. The information in the first cave drawings was limited to that particular cave, and could only convey information across time. With Gutenberg's invention, the information could be disseminated more efficiently, both economically and geographically to reach a larger audience. The radio was a continuation of the previous mediums and had the ability to distribute information across a greater area more rapidly, though usually confined within national borders. As an illustration, the cave paintings, the newspapers and the radio, are all continuation of each other in the sense that they functioned as informational and educational mediums. In other words, the content has been consumed by newer mediums. New media, or digital media as it is also called, marks a change in this continuation, where different mediums that traditionally had conveyed different content, are now converging into a common medium - the internet. Several scholars argue against this notion of one medium uniting all previous mediums, and they generally agree to Henry Jenkins idea of the "Black Box Fallacy" (Jenkins, 2006) – which warns against the temptation to think that all media will one day converge into one piece of device.

So if content from all imaginable mediums can be accessed through one device or a "black box" as Jenkins calls it, would that be what media convergence is about? No he says, and refers to Marshall McLuhan who says that "the medium is the message", by which he means that using the medium, like for example watching television, has a greater influence on our lives than the actual content. (Levinson, 2001) McLuhan gives the example of the electric light in his book "Understanding media" (McLuhan, 1964):

The instance of the electric light may prove illuminating in this connection. The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the "content" of any medium is always another medium. (p. 15-16)

McLuhan sees the electric light as a medium which convey information without a message. He thereby explains that the content of a medium, such as television, is not the actual news program or soap opera that are being shown, but the television in itself, and how it affects the user's life.

According to McLuhan the content of the "black box" is the "older" mediums it has consumed, like newspapers, film, television, radio etc. In the analogy presented in chapter one of this essay, it is suggested that the content as such, i.e. news programmes and soap operas, is consumed by newer mediums. This eventually leads to the fallacy that all content converge into one type of

content – conveyed through the “black box”. McLuhan’s theory effectively deals with this fallacy by claiming that new mediums feed from the older mediums and not from its content as such.

The internet is a medium that are feeding generously from older mediums, but what medium will supersede it? Levinson’s interpretation of McLuhan suggests that media is undergoing a constant process of evolution under the pressure of human usage and invention. McLuhan’s distinction between “Hot and Cold Media” illustrates the constant process from within, where hot media is equal to high definition media, and leaves little room for participation, and cold media, on the other hand, is in low definition and invites to participation. This can be used as a thermometer to measure the temperature between mediums. (Levinson, 2001; McLuhan, 1964) As an example, the Google TV which incorporates the interactive capabilities of a computer into a television set illustrates the constant consumption of older media. The high definition flat screen that projects the content is “heating” up the medium, while the interactive social media features on the same device is “cooling” it down. Television in itself is seen as a cool device, despite the fact that it has become hotter over time, going from first projecting black and white pictures to the current High Definition flat screen televisions which leave little space for the imagination. As Levinson describe it (Levinson, 2001); [...] these “hotting ups,” (...), have not been hot enough to burn through and transform TV’s cool packaging (p. 108). Perhaps is the television in the process of being consumed by a new medium, or perhaps its packaging become cooler with Google TV and the television as a medium will persist.

McLuhan’s work has for many years been criticized for being media deterministic, claiming that he supported the belief that technologies possess a special quality that determine its influence on society, and was therefore more or less ignored in mass media research. Paul Levinson acknowledges that he was initially critical to McLuhan’s theory, who he thought put the humans as products or effects of technology. He admits that he was too focused on the content as such. (Levinson, 2001) Today new media research in general agrees that technology both shape and are shaped by its social context. Lievrouw and Livingstone confirm this, and suggest that the shaping process of new media is recombinant. (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006) By this they mean that, new media is constantly developing new mediums based on a hybridization of both existing and new technologies, where the social context has shaped both previous and current technologies, which are being consumed by newer mediums. Whereas McLuhan was seen as a media determinist, the latter theory has a constructivist approach to the relation between technology and the society, which implies that the process is driven by the interaction between the two.

Gillian Youngs provide us with a more external view of the theories mentioned in the previous chapter. She critiques the fact that we look at technology, both in our personal lives and in the study of communications, as just a tool outside social processes – an instrumentalist view – that she calls exogenous. She advocates an endogenous view which means to see technology as an integral part of the society, and to acknowledge it to be an important part in how power is expressed politically, economically and sociologically. She warns on the other hand that traditionally it has been looked upon as technological deterministic to just suggest that technology has some sort of impact on society, which was the case with McLuhan. (Youngs, 2007)

Why is media convergence important?

The endogenous view leads us to why convergence is important, by claiming that technology plays a role in society when it comes to power. As we will see, convergence affects society on an individual, local and global level, as well as it affects economy, politics and culture both directly and indirectly.

According to Henry Jenkins convergence is first evident in cultural forms, implying that, by monitoring the cultural aspect of society we will know how the rest of society will be affected or shaped by it. He further claims that “media convergence fosters a new participatory folk culture by giving average people the tools to archive, annotate, appropriate and re-circulate content” (Jenkins, 2001, p. 93), and suggests that this will lead to a cultural change that will affect all aspects of our lives – the same way that the renaissance and Gutenberg’s invention did to culture 600 years ago. While the movable type laid the foundation for the emergence of the public sphere and the empowerment of the public, new media is breaking it down into distributed public spheres, and empowering the individual. Is this just a result of socio-political tension triggered by media empowerment, or is there something in the nature of media that drives this change. McLuhan’s theory of “Hot and Cold” media suggests that hot technology succeeding cool may have a disruptive impact on culture. Here is an excerpt from his book “Understanding media” (McLuhan, 1964), where he gives an example of its disruptive impact:

When Australian natives were given steel axes by the missionaries, their culture, based on the stone axe, collapsed. The stone axe had not only been scarce but had always been a basic status symbol of male importance. The missionaries provided quantities of sharp steel axes and gave them to women and children. The men had even to borrow these from the women, causing a collapse of male dignity. A tribal and feudal hierarchy of

traditional kind collapses quickly when it meets any hot medium of the mechanical, uniform, and repetitive kind. (p. 33)

He further points out that the speeding up of exchange and information will fragment a tribal structure. Is this what happened when Gutenberg invented the movable type, and is it happening now with the increasing flow and speed of information through new media convergence? This leads us back to Jenkins statement that convergence is first evident in cultural forms. New media in particular is an integral part of culture because it enables the consumers also to be producers of content. This potentially detribalizes the traditional power structures of content production, where the major media companies have the ownership of culture content, i.e. cartoons such as Disney's Donald Duck. New media facilitates a participatory culture, where information and communication technology (ICT) enhances the possibilities for horizontal communication between people, and a flourishing environment for content production. The disruption in other words that convergence bring to the media industry, will eventually happen to the society as a whole, affecting political, economical and social aspects of society.

Scholars like Jenkins and Castells (Castells, 2000; Jenkins, 2006) argue that the participatory culture that the network society is facilitating will result in a more horizontal, and to a certain extent, a more democratic society. They provide a fairly optimistic view of convergence as an empowerment tool for the individual. But as McLuhan illustrated with his example of the introduction of the axe, convergence also detribalize and diverge a society. For example; the public sphere, where the public as a whole participate through the struggle for distribution, become consumed by the "cooler" participatory culture that convergence of new media brings. The fragmentation into several small public spheres means that there will not be a common sphere for elaboration. Instead there will be many and narrower distributed spheres, so to participate in the public debate it is necessary to be able navigate among all these spheres to acquire the information that traditionally has been delivered through single mediums like the newspaper or television.

Another characteristic of the participatory culture is the notion that the audiences become more migratory in the sense that they have a higher tendency to change spheres. New media and the fragmentation of the public sphere make it possible for the citizen to choose spheres according to her preferences. In a cultural context the citizen will have the opportunity to move more swiftly through different content providers, accessing content that interests her, and then move to other sources she finds more interesting. In addition to this she can interact and participate in spheres, and express her own feelings and opinions. This migratory culture brings a kind of

independence to the citizen in form of leaving her with the responsibility to navigate between the spheres. But as this independence matures along side with evolution of the convergence culture, the citizens perhaps will demand similar possibilities when it comes to their rights and duties as citizens. This for instance suggests they want to bring their participatory culture to politics and perhaps demand politics to open up for more direct democracy, where they can interact more frequently with their politicians.

Jenkins (Jenkins, 2004; Jenkins, 2006) claims that consumption will eventually consume the public sphere, and that consumerism and citizenship will converge. In media culture this process of convergence is already commencing, and the traditional borders between producers and consumers are fading. Media content is melted together with commercial interests so to reach the individual both as a citizen and as a consumer. In mass media the commercial motives was more transparent in the sense that it targeted a group of people, and that the public sphere would, to a certain extent, set a standard for what is acceptable and what is not when it comes to blending content and advertising. A medium like the internet makes it possible for commercial interests to explicitly target the consumer on the basis of information that has been gathered about her. This disclosed symbiosis of content and advertising does not have a public sphere to control the accuracy of the information, and instead it is left to the citizen to determine whether the information address her as a citizen or a consumer. This points out how the fragmentation of media requires more critical thinking from the citizen, and the challenges she faces in a more diverse society.

Convergence is important because it affects all aspects of the society, and ultimately it changes the way people live their lives. On a micro level it changes the way we interact with media by multitasking several mediums at once, and on macro level it changes the political agenda of nation states. In between these two extremities there is an entire universe of converging going on. But as discussed in this essay, convergence brings divergence both on a technological- and a social level. New media reinforce fragmentation and divergence (Ludes & ebrary, 2008), by the constant evolution of new mediums. Convergence is an ongoing process or perhaps even an ongoing explosion similar to the “big bang theory”, where the universe is constantly expanding through the divergence of planets and solar systems, and where hot matter is constantly being cooled down and thereby expanding space. This analogy suggests that convergence is an expanding process, and as much as it converge it also fragmentize and diverge society. Whereas the traditional public sphere is “hot” in the sense that it does not invite for participation, the “cooler” multiple public spheres does. And in the same way as a Google TV require a higher

level of technical skills to operate compared to a traditional television, the new multiple public spheres requires that the citizen are able and have the skills to orientate herself in a participatory culture. Those who do not meet these requirements risk to land on the wrong side of the “digital divide”.

Conclusion

Different kinds of media have traditionally been strongly associated with the type of content it has conveyed. The Newspaper and its consumer the Radio - have been associated with news and educational content, while the Novel and its consumer the Film - have been linked to entertainment media. These examples shows that media has been strongly associated with the content it conveys. With the emergence of the internet and the digitalization of media, it has been a misconception that the convergence of media also means that the content as such will converge. McLuhan’s theory tells us to look at the medium as the message, implying that it is the way the medium is being used which matter. In other words, media convergence is a convergence of how we use media, which in turn leads to new ways of conveying news, entertainment and educational content. So what is “new” about new media? Interactivity! Along with digitalization comes not only the possibility for text, sound and pictures to converge, but also the proliferation of ICT’s. Together it facilitates the emergence of a participatory culture, where ICT and the production of content create a sphere for cultural interaction, where everyone can participate.

This participatory culture is the “digital” renaissance in the sense that it will lead to cultural change. Similar to the original renaissance it will bring a political, economical and social shift through the mechanisms of convergence and divergence. This essay has attempted to show that understanding convergence is important because there might be a connection between the nature of new media and the way it affects society. The “universe” analogy; where a constant process of convergence and divergence is expanding the convergence universe, illustrates how media has a natural force that unites and fragment on a technological level, and how this force is transcended onto cultural convergence through the interaction between technology and society. Convergence therefore is a key factor to understand the processes and future developments of our society.

References

- Castells, M. (2000). *The rise of the network society* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Jenkins, H. (2001). Convergence? I diverge. *Technology Review*, , 6 December 2010.
- Jenkins, H. (2004). The cultural logic of media convergence. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7(1), 33-43. doi:10.1177/1367877904040603
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture : Where old and new media collide*. New York ; London: New York University Press.
- Levinson, P. (2001). *Digital McLuhan : A guide to the information millennium*. London: Routledge.
- Lievrouw, L. A., & Livingstone, S. M. (2006). *Handbook of new media : Social shaping and social consequences of ICTs* (Updated student ed.). London: Sage.
- Ludes, P., & ebrary, I. (2008). *Convergence and fragmentation media technology and the information society*. Bristol ; Chicago: Intellect.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media : The extensions of man*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Youngs, G. (2007). *Global political economy in the information age : Power and inequality*. London: Routledge.