

Convergence calls: Multimedia storytelling at British news websites

By Neil Thurman and Ben Lupton

Address for correspondence:

Neil Thurman
Department of Journalism and Publishing
City University
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB
ENGLAND

(t) +44 (0)207 040 8222
(m) +44 (0)7813 009590
(e) neilt@soi.city.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper uses qualitative interviews with senior editors and managers from a selection of the UK's national online news providers to describe and analyse their current experimentation with multimedia and video storytelling. The results show that, in a period of declining newspaper readership and TV news viewing, editors are keen to embrace new technologies, which are seen as being part of the future of news. At the same time, text is still reported to be the cornerstone for news websites, leading to changes in the grammar and function of news video when used online. The economic rationale for convergence is examined and the paper investigates the partnerships sites have entered into in order to be able to serve their audience with video content. In-house video is complimenting syndicated content, and the authors examine the resulting developments in newsroom training and recruitment practices. The paper provides journalism and interactive media scholars with case studies on the changes taking place in newsrooms as a result of the shift towards multimedia, multiplatform news consumption.

Key Words:

British news websites, convergence, multimedia, news video, online journalism, podcasting

Introduction

Across the developed world, news companies are transforming their online operations, with text and still images increasingly augmented by a more kinetic mix of media. Video, interactive graphics, and audio are supplementing the more traditional outputs: generated by journalists who are being encouraged to work in new ways for publications chasing audiences choosing to spend more time online,¹ in increasingly multimedia environments.² In Britain—the subject of this paper—2007 saw *The Guardian* newspaper start the process of investing £15 million (Myton 2007) in its websites, in part so they could “play videos off the page” (Butterworth 2007); and *The Times*, *The Mirror*, *The Sun*, and *The Telegraph* joining the “growing trend of newspapers ... to carry video content on their websites” (Reevell 2007).

These changes are connected to news providers’ concerns about the phenomena of declining newspaper circulation³ and TV audiences⁴ which, although evident for decades in some territories, have become amplified by the rise of the Internet. “As an industry, many of us have been remarkably, unaccountably, complacent” Rupert Murdoch told the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April 2005, in a speech that was seen as something of a watershed in traditional news providers’ attitudes to the Internet. “A new generation of media consumers has risen demanding content delivered ... very much as they want it”, he said, continuing: “the emphasis online is shifting from text only to text with video” (Murdoch 2005). Commentators like Bill Hagerty, editor of the *British Journalism Review*, agree, suggesting that one answer to the “crisis” he believes “printed newspapers” face is “multimedia” (Burrell 2006).

With advertising being the primary source of revenue for the vast majority of newspaper websites (Thurman and Herbert 2007), publishers seem to be hoping that multimedia content can appeal to the consumption habits of web users and that they can, as a result, reclaim some of the advertising revenue lost to the Internet.⁵ However, their pure-play⁶ competitors—the likes of YouTube and Google Video, who together have a 30.7 percent share of the UK's online video market—have a head start. Even established news broadcasters are playing catch up: Sky, in which Murdoch's News Corporation has a majority shareholding, accounted for just 4.3 percent of the online videos watched in the UK in April 2007 (Sanders 2007).

Rationale

The use of multimedia by news websites, even those with print parentage, is not a new phenomenon. The BBC News website has been hosting 'News in Video' and 'News in Audio' since its launch in 1997 (Hermida 2007) and since at least the beginning of the millennium, *The Guardian* website has offered audio and 'interactive guides'—which combine multiple media in clickable Flash movies (GuardianUnlimited 2000).

Internationally there is similar history of multimedia news provision at sites including MSNBC.com and Sweden's Aftonbladet.se (Aquino, Bierhoff et al. 2002).

This study was prompted by the substantially increased prominence being given to multimedia by the British national and regional online news providers, and the parallel investment in technology, staff, and training. In June 2007 one of the UK's largest newspaper publisher, Trinity Mirror, announced the start of "an overhaul of all its regional newspaper websites" with "greater emphasis on multimedia, with video content

prominent on the front page" (Stabe 2007a). In the same month the Johnston Press, one of the UK's four largest local newspaper publishers, talked about creating "a true multimedia experience for our users" (Stabe 2007b). Their *Lancashire Evening Post* newsroom has been at the forefront of the company's multimedia strategy with "every member of editorial staff [now producing] video and online stories" (Smith 2007). At the national level *The Daily Telegraph* launched a "news-on-demand" video service" in September 2007, at the same time as *The Guardian* was promising "serious investment in its own video team" (Press Gazette 2007). Developments like these have been significant enough for the Press Complaints Commission—the British newspaper and magazine industries' self-regulating body—to announce that it has extended its remit to cover "editorial audio and video material on newspaper and magazine websites" (Reevell 2007).

Critical context

Academic literature on the adoption of multimedia by news websites is no longer scarce, but it often focuses on the coming together of previously separate print, broadcast, and online news organisations and the resulting converged outputs. Well documented case studies include: the New Jersey Online's Community Connection—a coming together of three regional newspapers and a cable TV station (Boczkowski 2004); TBO.com (Dupagne and Garrison 2006); and Dallasnews.com (Singer 2004). The British experience of convergence differs from these American cases because convergence is usually an internal process of integration between online, and print *or* broadcast newsrooms within the same organization. This is largely due to the UK's cross-media

ownership rules that do not allow newspaper companies to control TV or radio stations. The BBC's domination of TV and radio markets is also a factor (Aquino et al, 2002). Few studies have been made of convergence in the British context. Cottle and Ashton's (1999) study of the BBC Newscenter is a notable exception but is, at the time of writing, more than eight years old. Another is Williams and Franklin's (2007) report on multimedia and online strategies in UK regional and local newsrooms, which provides a useful comparison with the national picture that this paper hopes to paint.

Methodology

It has been said that "the most significant work on news is qualitative" (Tuchman 1991). We therefore believe our main method—the in-depth research interview—was an appropriate tool to use to examine the increasing adoption of multimedia by mainstream news websites in the UK. Not only did our approach allow us, as Newcomb (1991) describes, to gain "multiple perspectives" on the topic, and gather "more comprehensive information than might [have been] possible in participant observation"; but it was a "heuristic device": the responses gave us "new perspectives and questions for later subjects".

We are aware of the limitations of the interview method, specifically that the attitudes reported may differ from observed behaviour (see: Deutscher 1973), however our desire to provide description and some analysis of this rapidly-evolving phenomena meant that there was no time for triangulation in the data collection stage. The number of interviews conducted (n=10) are two more than McCracken (1998) believes is sufficient

for most in-depth interview projects. The following participants were interviewed during June and July 2007:

- Steve Bennedik - Editor, Sky News Networked Media
- Pete Clifton - Head of BBC News Interactive
- David Dunkley Gyimah - Senior Lecturer, University of Westminster, and VJ trainer, Press Association
- Steve Herrmann - Editor, BBC News Interactive
- Neil McIntosh - Head of Editorial Development, Guardian Unlimited
- James Montgomery - Editor, FT.com
- Steve Purcell - Editor, Mirror.co.uk
- Ed Roussel - Digital editor, Telegraph Media Group
- Anne Spackman - Editor, Timesonline.co.uk
- Marc Webber - Assistant Editor, News, The Sun Online

Following a preliminary literature review we identified themes to be explored in the interviews including: newsroom convergence; the training, management, and recruitment of multimedia journalists; and the technological, editorial and commercial issues around the increased use of audio-visual media.

After verbatim transcription, the transcriptions were analysed using a modified version of the issue-focused method recommended by Weiss (1994).

Analysis (I): The multimedia newsroom: Organisation and staffing

'Housing the geeks': Convergence and co-location

A number of the UK's newsrooms are undergoing dramatic physical transformation to keep up with the demand for 24/7 multimedia content. The Telegraph Group moved into a new multi-million pound home in 2006 to much fanfare. The "hub and spoke" layout of its central newsroom was designed "as part of the integration of its print and digital publishing interests" (Reece 2006). An early attempt to merge online, print, TV, and radio occurred at Tampa Bay Online. Their success, according to the editor of the *Manchester Evening News*, was a result of "physically mixing journalists from different media into one workspace" (Kiss 2003). But four years on, was co-location still perceived as a key element of successful convergence by our participants?

Sky News' Networked Media Editor, Steve Bennedik (interview, 2007), believed it was. "Often newsrooms were built prior to any conversation about multimedia and convergence. New media was parked in a disparate part of the building. Let's house the geeks there. That's the old world," he said. Online has now become an integral part of the storytelling operation: "When you bring these people into the core of the room, when a story breaks, you're also looking across the room and reminding yourself that there's new media there. They're a part of the process". *The Telegraph's* Ed Roussel (interview, 2007) agreed that physical co-location had bought transparency to meetings and "improved communication" between heads of departments and their staff.

The Guardian were planning to be a little more restrained in their newsroom convergence plans. Their Head of Editorial Development, Neil McIntosh (interview,

2007), said: “We’re not thinking Telegraphesque. We all move to a new building and suddenly web and print sit next to one another. It’s been a sort of creeping process and one that desk editors are working out for themselves”. However, McIntosh did feel that there was need for change. “Currently the Guardian Unlimited newsdesk is here. *The Guardian*’s newsdesk is on the first floor. *The Observer* newsdesk is up the hill. Does that make sense in a 24/7 operation? No,” he asserted.

Anne Spackman (interview, 2007) also had reservations about constructing a single team sitting and working together. “We really don’t want to do quite what *The Telegraph* did at first,” said the Times Online Editor. “A website has to be constantly worked at ... If you have people who are in their heads in both places, the website doesn’t get the attention it needs.” FT.com editor James Montgomery (interview, 2007) also believed that a website needed a separate team—one whose role is to innovate. “We feel you need a small vanguard group who are learning new technology or thinking about new types of journalism,” he said.

An ‘easy sell’? Coopting convergence

Unsurprisingly, considering that respondents were newsroom editors and company management, their staff’s reaction to multimedia, and the training and work it entails, was reported as being positive (McIntosh, Montgomery, Roussel, Spackman, Webber, interviews, 2007). But some of the newspapers questioned had offset any potential fallout by making the multimedia world a voluntary one (McIntosh, Spackman, Webber, interviews, 2007). Because of the sheer number of journalists available to nationals such as *The Guardian*—a luxury not afforded to the regionals (Williams and Franklin 2007)—

volunteering had been straightforward. “We’ve actually found it very easy to work with volunteers. And that’s deliberate,” said McIntosh. “There’s no point forcing [anyone] and having rows because we’ve got more than enough.” Times Online’s Anne Spackman agreed with this policy. “We’ve got a group of people who opted to do new stuff ... They think it’s their future,” she said.

However keen journalists were to adapt, the burden of extra work had created some friction. James Montgomery said that at FT.com:

The difficulties come at a lower level How do you make time to learn new skills? Does it add burdens to the working day? Yes, there have been some shift patterns that have been difficult for some people.

Ed Roussel suggested that vanity and the chance to be creative had made video an “easy sell”. As a result, the demand to work with multimedia easily outstripped supply. But there were some journalists within the Telegraph Group who remained sceptical. “Some are very locked in their ways and you need to make a decision about how to deal with people like that,” he said. “If they’re brilliant writers then let them get on with it, forget about multimedia. But if you need them to do it, you need to persuade them and bring them aboard.”

Acquiring multimedia skills: Training and recruitment

What skills do journalists need in order to succeed in the increasingly multi-faceted world of modern news production? All of the respondents emphasized the importance of having these core skills: being able to write quickly, clearly, and accurately; being able to spell and having excellent grammar; being able to write snappy headlines; and possessing

the ability to spot a strong story (Benedik, Clifton, Herrmann, McIntosh, Montgomery, Purcell, Roussel, interviews, 2007). “We teach them, to some extent, the technology,” said Sky News’ Steve Benedik.

That said, having a multimedia background did seem to be a competitive advantage. BBC Interactive’s Pete Clifton said that prospective employees with experience working across different media were more likely to fit into “an integrated newsroom of the future”. Roussel agreed, saying that “versatility does have a lot of value ... the market is in need of people with strong production skills”. He thought that journalism schools underrated “the expertise required to produce multimedia”.

In addition to training their existing staff, some respondents stressed the need to bring in specialists rather than attempting to hybridise “pools of multimedia beasts who can do anything and everything” (Clifton, interview, 2007). Webber talked about how the structure of a newspaper team—editors, subeditors, writers, and photographers: experts in their field with set responsibilities—works just as well online. “This is not robo-journo. This is not having journalists with a pen in one hand and a camera in the other. They are distinctive disciplines and you need experts”, he said (interview, 2007). Guardian Unlimited’s Head of Editorial Development said their journalists had had some video training but agreed that specialists needed to be hired. “If you want video journalists, you probably ought to hire someone who specialises in that,” said McIntosh. He concluded that being an exemplary journalist in both print and multimedia probably wasn’t feasible. “I don’t think they’re a necessarily complementary set of skills”.

Analysis (II): The Use of Multimedia on the Web

Levelling the playing field?

The success of YouTube seems to have been an agent of change in the online news market: inspiring newspapers struggling to find an online business model to experiment with the potential of self-produced video content, and forcing sites with broadcast parentage (the BBC and Sky News) to look long and hard at the content and delivery of news video online.

The short, sharp shocks of YouTube-style video combined with the web's lo-fidelity picture quality have encouraged newspapers to compete, online, against their broadcast rivals. "I think papers have certainly got an opportunity" said *The Mirror's* Steve Purcell (interview, 2007):

If we can break stories in a video format then we've got a distinct advantage. We're not weighed down by the mentality of thinking we can only do this with five men and two cameras. We can just go along with a mobile phone and take footage. We can also get users to send in their experiences and not be too concerned about the quality.

The Telegraph's Ed Roussel concurred: "The cost of production in television is sky high in a world where suddenly anybody can produce video and put it on the Internet. Will what we do be as good? Probably not. Does it need to be? No," he said (interview, 2007).

The Guardian's Neil McIntosh suggested that broadcasters such as the BBC were hindered by politics when it came to editing 'cut to the chase' bites that sit well with today's time-poor audiences. "That must be a huge 'What! We're the best broadcaster in

the world. Why are you cutting our stuff to ribbons? Why are you insisting on natural audio and not someone retelling the story?” BBC Interactive’s Pete Clifton agreed that the corporation was focused on providing output for its TV news operation and that online video had been an aside. “Historically, we’ve put huge amounts of video on the site, and it’s just really been what’s been on the Ten O’clock News. Far too often it’s not performed a very useful function at all,” he said, continuing: “At the moment there are too many people here who are still very focused around the traditional outlets.”

The evolving grammar of online video

At the BBC, the bridge between online and television will be built by a new TV News on-demand editor. “He’ll be charged with trying to bring the right kind of video through to the site” said Clifton. For Clifton, video on the web should be integrated with text and “focused around a particular moment”. It must also complement the written story, not repeat it. “It’s something we don’t really do very well,” he said. “We need to get to a point where we can present the story as an overall proposition in one place. The text and the video work much better like that” (interview, 2007).

Guardian Unlimited launched a full online video service in the summer of 2007, a good deal later than their major competitors.⁷ McIntosh explained why they decided to bide their time: “We wanted to explore the way of doing it properly. We thought that what our traditional print rivals in this country were doing is dreadful.” The site’s editorial management looked to *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*. for inspiration and created a small television house to produce video “focused” on supporting text journalism as well as making “original pieces of video journalism built from the ground up” (interview, 2007). One big difference from their rivals was that *Guardian*

journalists were not expected to appear on camera. “We won’t be having our journalists interviewing one another across the table in the newsroom. I can’t understand why people do that. If they start appearing on camera then something’s wrong,” said McIntosh.

Roussel agreed that “the role of the anchor will become hugely diminished globally. People will have less tolerance for them”, but did predict that experts who have authority on specialist subjects such as business and sport were likely to flourish in the medium. At *The Telegraph*, it was the older, experienced ‘specialists’ who were proving to be more popular on video:

People like Hilary Alexander . . . or Jeff Randall . . . [are] far more natural on camera and get far more hits than people half their age. Why? Because they’ve got a lot of television experience, they’re confident, at top of their fields, and they’ve got fantastic access (Roussel, interview, 2007).

Sky News’ Steve Bennedik believed audiences had markedly different preferences for video online and on TV. “[On the web] people are going for 40 second stories rather than two minute ones,” he said. “They’re going for lightweight stories that they can share with their friends.” Clifton also supported the notion that video worked if it was “accessible and shareable”. Despite audiences leaning towards frothy content, Sky News insisted that serious news would remain a production imperative. “We’ve got some fantastic reports from around the world. We can’t put them underneath the carpet—we’ve got to showcase them” said the Networked Editor (interview, 2007). Whether users will consume these longer pieces was a cause for concern. Bennedik was hopeful, but not entirely optimistic, that Sky News would be able to maintain their in-depth investigative

stories on-line: “You’ve got to hope that technology will improve so people’s consumption habits change. I hope we can lead in this area too.”

Text still core

Although at the time this study took place video was, in places, being presented as the key element of UK news providers’ online strategy—witness the October 2007 *Press Gazette* headline, ‘Video use is now central to online publishing’ (Howard 2007)—our respondents stressed that text was still core. According to Anne Spackman, video was only part of Times Online’s content. “I don’t think we should pretend it’s the first point for all our stories,” she said. “The core of what we do is content. Although video is absolutely part of this, I don’t think it’s about having every single news reporter out with a camera” (interview, 2007). She suggested that *The Times*’ expertise was in specialisms—especially business—and that these types of story were not picture-led. BBC News Interactive Editor Steve Herrmann added weight to the notion that text was still the cornerstone for news websites. “At the moment the vast majority of our audience comes for text. We wouldn’t want to make an important story available only in video because we’d end up disenfranchising them,” he said (interview, 2007).

Video syndication vs. in-house production: Cost and benefits

When *The Mirror* launched its revamped site in February 2007, much criticism was thrown at the paper for its American-centric video. Purcell (interview, 2007) cast more light on the launch: “The promises that were made by [our content partner, Roo Media] didn’t materialize.... It was a bloody mess, relying on American led stuff.” Despite relying heavily on syndicated content, respondents firmly believed that in-house

produced content would become the backbone of future video strategies (McIntosh, Montgomery, Roussel, Spackman, Webber, interviews, 2007). Spackman talked about how Times Online was slowly moving away from the legacy of their ROO deal. “We didn’t have a sense of ownership of the player...When those early deals were done nobody knew what people would want to watch on a site like ours”. She suggested that the basic problem was that the providers had not grasped the concept of video threads that sit well with text stories. “They were no good at giving us those things” (interview, 2007). At the time of writing, Sun Online still had a video contract with the Press Association. “That’ll kick the bucket to be honest with you. We’re now creating more and more of our own content and that will get priority,” said Webber (interview, 2007). “Putting video on the Internet is a completely different phenomenon and it has to be based around your own original content. So the most popular video is stuff we’ve shot ourselves.” Montgomery agreed that specialist video was a unique selling point for newspapers and described how the FT.com were taking advantage of their niche position in the market with video content like ‘View from the top’. But to produce ‘brand video’—a process that is expensive and time consuming compared to writing text stories—a production team is needed. Newspapers differed in how they approached the workflow issue. *The Guardian* reported they would use a three-person crew for shooting big news stories: a correspondent, a cameraperson, and a producer who would also double up as a second cameraperson. Other papers were sticking with a two-person format (Purcell, Webber, interviews, 2007) with some sending out a single journalist with a camera (Purcell, Roussel, Spackman, interviews, 2007). *The Sun* were using a two person team who shoot for five hours, return, and spend a couple more editing the video

into a 120 second piece. “That’s a whole days work for one bit of two-minute video,” said Webber.

Despite video production being labour-intensive, Purcell suggested that the time and effort it took for a journalist to produce a video story compared to a text article would provide good value in terms of potential advertising revenue. “Bearing in mind that selling ads to video is a lot more profitable than selling ads online, then the opportunities to make money on the back of it are greater” (interview, 2007).

Video: Embedded or stand alone?

Most of the national news websites studied have relied on video players—one stop shops where users go to view the video content they offer. The reasons that video clips, unlike still images, were not embedded with the text stories they illustrated were often technical. In our interviews there was agreement that ‘embedding’ video, at the page or story level, was a move in the right direction, although some (Herrmann, McIntosh, Roussel, interviews, 2007) didn’t think this would be the end of the video player.

The advantages of embedding video were most clearly demonstrated by a trial run at the BBC. The results were dramatic and showed the BBC News Interactive’s editor that for “day to day” use their video player was more or less redundant. “The embedded trial we’ve done has been hugely successful. Maybe by the end of [2007], that’s how we’ll be dealing with video day to day,” said Clifton (interview, 2007). Previously on the BBC News website, a video placed in the stand-alone player, accessed via a link next to the related text story, had an average take-up rate of two percent. However, with an embedded Flash video placed at the top of the text story, the conversion rate leapt to

between 25–40 percent. Feedback was generally very positive (Clifton and Herrmann, interviews, 2007), with 85 percent of users preferring Flash to Windows Media (Hermida 2007).

Editorially, embedding will compel journalists to think much more about how video integrates with their story, according to Herrmann. In the days of stand-alone players, technical specialists handled audio and video. Now, due to the visibility of video on the page, writers will have to “instinctively” grasp the point in which it can be introduced to the story (Herrmann, interview, 2007).

Guardian Unlimited were also set to show their videos in embedded form, as well as in a separate player. The major difference with their competitors is that the majority will not be voiced. Context was behind this decision. “We’re telling the story in text,” said McIntosh. “We’ll embed 30 seconds of the scene on top of the story. So the audience can see a little bit of what’s happened as well.” This type of video presentation would be “utterly pointless” within a player admitted the Head of Editorial Development. “There’s no context there,” he added. *The Guardian* had no intention to treat video as a special media:

If it’s not an exceptional piece of content, it shouldn’t live outside or separately from the rest of what we do. That’s absolutely the key thing for us, how do we embed the stuff? Its primary home has to be the story (McIntosh, interview, 2007).

Roussel agreed that positioning video where it is relevant would increase its uptake dramatically, but says that websites should also provide choice. “There will be people

who just want to see the video, so you need to provide an environment where you can navigate within the media player,” he suggested (Roussel, interview, 2007).

Sonic uncouth

The consensus among respondents was that podcasts in their current form were a niche product, only suitable for certain content types. Growth had been slow and resources were being directed towards video development (McIntosh, Montgomery, Purcell, Roussel, Webber, interviews, 2007). However the growing popularity of ‘off-the-page’ audio streaming, the opening up of the wireless networks, and the increasing growth of 3G mobile technology in the UK provided some cause for optimism (Herrmann, McIntosh, Roussel, Spackman, interviews, 2007).

Guardian Unlimited said they were “beefing up” their audio production although the podcast was a small element that was struggling to get “traction”. Part of the future, said McIntosh, was “a range of products tailored to the ‘on-the-move’ experience”.

Montgomery said that although FT.com’s podcasts “do quite well . . . video will win hands down against podcasts and audio . . . from a commercial point of view I don’t think [they are] viable,” said *The Telegraph*’s Digital Editor (interview, 2007).

In contrast, Times Online were embracing podcasts with sport at “the forefront” of their plans. “iPod ownership amongst *Times*’ readers is massive,” said the Online Editor. The Game podcast (soccer focused)—with a 20,000 per week download rate—was considered to have been a highly effective marketing tool for the site and the newspaper. Sport mixed with comedy has also been a big hit with the site’s audience. “With the Baddiel and Skinner podcast we had 950,000 downloads during the [soccer] World Cup.

But we've had 350,000 since the end of the tournament nearly a year ago. We were astounded by that," said Spackman.

Interactive storytelling: A Flash in the pan?

Despite the inherent costs and time involved in producing interactive Flash graphics, many respondents believed that this media was here to stay (Benedik, Clifton, Herrmann, McIntosh, Montgomery, Spackman, interviews, 2007).

Clifton suggested that Flash allowed journalists to increase users' understanding about how events, such as natural disasters, occurred and were a good investment especially if they could be used "many times over" (Clifton, interview, 2007). Sky had recently set up a specialist team of journalists and developers to produce interactive graphics (Benedik, interview, 2007), and the BBC had reorganised their interactive graphics team so that writers and designers were "sitting in the same place and can get to work" when a story breaks, "rather than it taking days to do," said Clifton.

For *The Times* Flash provided a way of breaking out of "old school" story telling and connecting with an audience. "I think graphics and video threads will evolve the way we actually tell news. We will certainly start to experiment with this", said Spackman (interview, 2007). The FT.com's editor agreed that Flash offered a "richer form of story telling" (Montgomery, interview, 2007). The site had four people who produced interactive graphics and would like to have more. "In multimedia you've got to mix up video, graphics, stills, audio and video. We're just learning about that. I wouldn't say we've perfected it but we can see there are some quite compelling things you could do". But for newspapers, lack of funds and talent was hindering development in this area.

McIntosh said it was difficult to find people with the right combination of Flash and editorial skills (interview, 2007).

However there were some disadvantages to the technology according to Roussel. He said *The Telegraph* would be using a lot more Flash in the future, but they would be careful about how much. Search engine optimisation and browser compatibility had to be taken into account, as well as the fact that Flash files decrease page download speeds due to their relatively large size.

Virtual triviality?

Second Life, the online virtual world with a user base of almost nine million, was inhabited by a number of mainstream journalists in ‘avatar’ form during 2006–7. Both Reuters and Sky News sent correspondents into the realm—the former to report on the lives and business dealings of residents (BBC News website 2006) and the latter to ‘broadcast’ from a virtual studio (Sky News 2007). *The Guardian* organised a three day virtual music festival, ‘Second Fest’, on the platform (Krotoski 2007). Could such virtual worlds become an important news dissemination channel in the future? Although Gartner Research estimates that 80 percent of Internet users and major companies will have avatars by 2011 (McConnon 2007), many respondents felt that online worlds were a fad and resources were better focused elsewhere (Clifton, McIntosh, Montgomery, Roussel, interviews, 2007).

Despite the success of the “extremely profitable” Second Fest, McIntosh was firmly against sending correspondents there: “If you’re asking me, with my journalistic or editorial hat on, ‘should we be reaching out to people in there’? No. They’re not there to

hear from us". Sky News had received positive feedback on their trial and, although they were set to repeat the experiment, questions remained about its future. "It's certainly made a lot of waves and got a lot of publicity, probably more than it deserves," said Bennedik.

Times Online remained on the fence however. "I certainly don't think these things are a waste of time. If you don't experiment, you never find out," suggested Spackman. She recalled a meeting with Rupert Murdoch where he was told that certain initiatives hadn't worked out as planned. "Everybody around the table went jittery, but he said: 'You've got to go and try things out. We've got to go and find stuff'" (Spackman, interview, 2007). But the paper was very aware of users' perceptions if they were to try something with Second Life. "People might think 'In comes *The Times*, they're only here because they think they've got to be trendy.' Will it get us anywhere? I just don't know," admitted the Online editor.

Analysis (III): Generating Advertising Revenue

Respondents were optimistic that online video would attract high value advertising. There was some debate over whether pre-roll or mid roll commercials were more suited to online video, but all agreed that the standard 30-second TV advert had no place in this medium. Advertising agencies were thought to need to adapt quickly and innovatively to deal with the challenge of promoting products in very short time slots.

FT.com believed that, commercially, there was a huge opportunity for newspapers in video because a proportion of TV advertising revenue would move online. "Globally, the ad spend on TV is huge," said Montgomery (interview, 2007). "You might capture

some of that if you have video. We can talk to the same advertisers as CNN. That's what convergence is all about."

The universal view was that advertisements should be no longer than 15 seconds because of the relatively short length of video stories. *The Sun* experimented with 30-second pre-rolls but had little success. "We've sold some, which no doubt affected the amount of people watching the video. They clicked off," said Webber (interview, 2007). But they had better luck with the more streamlined eight second pre-roll. "It actually increased the amount of videos watched." Guardian Unlimited believed they were in a position to educate the market because of their late entry. "We found that our competitors have no idea what they want. We can try to change this by saying, 'if you want high frequency ads across what will be extensive output, make it less than 10 seconds'" said McIntosh (interview, 2007). He suggested that the US was moving towards this model and that Flash video—because of its interactive features—would allow advertisers to be more innovative with their commercials. "[Users can] have an interactive experience with the ad That's much more appealing than 30 seconds of bludgeoning."

Mirror.co.uk were implementing a mid-roll advertising strategy. Tying advertisements that already sit on the page to video mid-rolls was extremely effective according to Purcell. However, Montgomery (interview, 2007) suggested that mid-rolls were "disruptive" and having ads embedded within the content reduced the quality of the video. "You have to keep a certain distance. I think pre-roll is better". Roussel agreed that mid-rolls were an editorial mistake. "With mid-roll breaks you'll see a lot of people simply leave the video," said *The Telegraph's* Digital Editor (interview, 2007).

Spackman said that product placement within podcasts has been a success for Times Online: “You have to make sure it’s done in [the right] tone but I wouldn’t be surprised if we saw that evolve” (interview, 2007). But Montgomery suggested there were issues around blended content and product placement. Editorial control could be compromised if a product becomes the subject of a podcast. “It has to be made explicit to the user” he said.

Discussion

Although the convergence of previously separate newsrooms—with the consequent changes to their outputs, and increased demands placed on the journalists they employ—is not a new phenomenon, the speed and extent of the changes taking place are increasing dramatically at the UK newsrooms featured in this study. This was recognised by the National Union of Journalists’ (NUJ 2007) report on multimedia working which, in November, called the “nature and pace of developments . . . all at once exhilarating, terrifying, baffling, inspiring and damaging”. As this study was coming to a close the BBC announced it would “launch a new multimedia newsroom, which will provide news for television, radio and the web” (Herrmann 2007). Whilst this study cannot adequately reflect such very recent developments or those that will undoubtedly follow, it does hope to provide some context with which to understand them.

Although convergence can imply termination “at the same point” (Simpson 2005), editors of the discrete newsrooms to be converged are often concerned to preserve their departments’ individual identities. “I am concerned that the editorial coherence of the news website should not be sacrificed in the name of efficiency” wrote the editor of the

BBC News website about the corporation's multimedia newsroom plans (Herrmann 2007). This study found that, in newsrooms more advanced in the convergence process, there was a recognition that having a separate team was useful to ensure that editorial and technical innovation could happen. That said, convergence does result in change for most of the journalists involved. Many, at least according to the NUJ's report (NUJ 2007), are working "longer hours" and taking on "more responsibility for no extra pay" in the converged newsrooms that are evolving. Our study, which unlike the NUJ's report focuses exclusively on the UK's national news providers, found that there was a lack of consensus over the need for journalists to be multi-skilled. Some editors said specialists would be hired, especially in video production, but others said a degree of versatility was required. The term "multimedia beast" was used disparagingly by the BBC in the context of staff who can do it all but none of it very well, but at the same time, the corporation was commissioning reporter Ben Hammersley to file in multiple-media, across multiple platforms, and to use a plethora of "social media web tools" (Holliday 2007).

Undoubtedly some journalists, like Hammersley, are excited by the possibilities that multimedia offers and most of the editors we spoke to stressed that involvement was voluntary. However more research is required to find out how many staff are 'embracing' video and audio because of the underlying fear of job losses. In an increasingly volatile industry, and with fresh journalism graduates increasingly likely to have a grounding in multimedia production, volunteering for extra training and work might be more of a requisite than an option especially at a time when *The Guardian*—proponents of 'voluntary' multi-platform training—recently told staff to expect job cuts in the lead up to

their move to King's Cross in 2008 (Tryhorn 2007); and the BBC's convergence plans are being "dictated by the need to make savage cuts" (NUJ 2007).

The economic imperatives for convergence are well documented. Scott (2005) suggests that media groups pursuing a multimedia agenda often "argue its virtues in terms of improved content" but believes change is actually driven by the economics of "convergent distribution". Indeed a 2002 report—co-authored by WAN, the global organization for the newspaper industry—said that "the potential for cost savings – through trained cross-media workers and reduced work forces and technology assisted repurposing" were "enormous" (Aquino, Bierhoff et al. 2002). Although the report's authors believed that "improved journalism" would result from integrated, multimedia newsrooms, others, like Scott, warn of "a dilution in story choice as multimedia newsrooms gradually cover fewer and fewer stories", with "less process stories, investigative reporting, international news, and in-depth coverage on any topic that requires time, effort, and money to produce or that does not play well on all media channels". The picture emerging from this study is more complicated. Although the content-sharing partnerships that Scott and Quinn (2005) believe will become the essence of business strategies in an era of convergence have happened, many editors signaled their desire to develop internally produced multimedia because they saw it as offering their sites a unique selling point. At *The Telegraph*, poster-boy for convergence in the UK, head count has actually risen following their 'integration' of print and online (Burton 2007). Online newspapers' in-house video was attracting a lot of interest perhaps, in part, as a result of its ability to accommodate online viewing preferences, unencumbered as it is by a broadcast tradition of high production values. Newspapers were hoping that they

could carry over their readers' appetite for expert commentary and exclusives from the "text only" to the "text with video" model that is emerging (Murdoch 2005).

Although commentators like Bill Hagerty believe that multimedia is an answer to the "crisis" (Burrell 2006) printed newspapers face, users' appetite for video should not be overestimated. It is easy to forget moving images are only part of the content jigsaw and should not be treated as the optimal format. Audiences come primarily for text, and video should be used to compliment this. Neither should newspapers underestimate the challenges of producing news video to the standards viewers expect. Some, like Stewart Kirkpatrick (2007) the former editor of *Scotsman.com*, doubt "there's large public appetite for low-quality video from professional news outlets", suggesting that "newspapers will have to deliver high-quality video targeted at key audience groups". And that's not cheap. Concerns about the quality of multimedia content, expressed by Scott (2005), Williams and Franklin (2007), and in the NUJ's report (NUJ 2007) were, perhaps surprisingly, also shared by Sky News' Networked Media Editor (Benedik, interview, 2007) who was worried that serious overseas coverage was not getting the attention it deserves on the web although, at least in this case, the cause would seem to be a result of shifts in viewing habits rather than economic or editorial directives.

At the BBC, although newsrooms might be converging, the video output of their TV and online operations is set to diverge as they acknowledge, after 10 years online, that these two channels have different requirements. Technological advances have been the catalyst for this shift. The use of Flash video is giving organisations like the BBC more flexibility in the way they present video stories, allowing for embedded content to be played directly off the page. Experiments have been very successful, and journalists will

have to come to grips with the way it can bring an extra dimension to a story. Although MacGregor (2003) argues that users may find it difficult to cope with the “differential rate[s] of bombardment” inherent in “television and text” the BBC’s trials have proved that there can be a symbiotic relationship between the two dissimilar mediums.

This study found that most editors regarded podcasts as a niche and take-up was proving to be slow. But *The Times* had made concerted efforts to produce audio content targeted towards a specific, younger audience. Success in connecting with this demography has attracted high-profile advertisers. This substantiates ComScore’s (2007) research that podcasts are popular with an educated and upwardly mobile demographic who are high on the hit list of big-spending companies. The problem with this type of audio though is that they work as a feed, similar to RSS. Once a reader subscribes, they have to physically unsubscribe to stop regular downloads to their PC. It is therefore impossible to tell whether or not the audio has been listened to and *The Times*’ impressive figures may have to be taken with a pinch of salt. But as Berry (2006) suggests, audio may develop into something that can be played directly on a player without the need for downloading. Editors are excited about this, and the release of the latest generation of iPods can only compound this optimism.

Participants believed that interactive ‘Flash’ graphics offered innovative ways for journalists to present their stories. However, such applications are expensive and time-consuming to create, requiring expertise that is not readily available. Launching correspondent avatars into online virtual worlds was over-hyped, however, and not worth the resources according to many.

The opportunity to generate advertising revenue from all of this, especially video, was seen as promising, although none of our participants were entirely confident about the best approach to take. The standard 30 second advert seems to have no place on the web and advertising agencies are going to have to work with a 10 to 15 second model, perhaps even shorter. Pre-roll seems to be the favoured option with the jury still out on the contentious mid-roll. Advertisers are likely to push for more blended content—YouTube are to start showing transparent ads on their videos (Sweney 2007a)—so editors will have to be careful to resist commercial pressures on editorial policy, and clearly delineate the boundaries between editorial and advertising.

This study revealed a high degree of experimentation in traditional news publishers' approaches to multimedia with no clear certainty about what will work or fail. There is a willingness to invest in the technologies to show video, but no clear picture emerged of what sort of video would be popular or profitable. Although the national newspaper website editors we spoke to believed that there was a huge opportunity in video, it remains to be seen whether the advertising revenue they hope for will come to these national, generic content providers in a “world of increasing consumer control, niche content and fragmented attention (Berman, Battino et al. 2007).

Notes

1. Average daily Internet use in the UK more than doubled in 2006 (White 2007).
2. 80 percent of British Internet users watched a video online in April 2007 (Comscore 2007).
3. In May 2007 every single UK national newspaper, with the exception of the *Financial Times*, recorded a drop in sales compared with May 2006 (Kiss and Brook 2007).
4. Television viewing in the UK fell by 4 percent in 2006 (White 2007).

5. Web-advertising revenue in the UK rose 47 percent to over £2 billion in 2006, equivalent to “almost half the amount spent on all TV advertising” (White 2007).
6. The Internet Encyclopaedia (Bidgoli 2004) defines a firm as pure-play “if its only distribution channel is the Internet or the wireless Web”.
7. *The Guardian* had previously hosted occasional video content, including a clip of a woman being punched by policemen outside British nightclub (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/video/page/0,,2028548,00.html>). The footage was obtained by *The Guardian* from a CCTV recording and not made in-house.

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