MAKING ONLINE NEWS
The Ethnography of New Media Production

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CHAPTER NINE

Do Online Journalists Belong in the Newsroom? A Belgian Case of Convergence

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Colson and Heinderyckx report preliminary findings from research with Belgian media which continued at the time of this publication. Although they report the results of ethnographic investigation of an online newsroom—as with the rest of chapters in this section, their focus is on convergence. The study provides an up-to-the minute analysis of specific convergence processes underway (and the organizational stresses they foment), complementing the overview of convergence research provided by Singer in the next chapter. It is a timely, and cautionary, analysis, coming at a time when many media institutions are struggling to find the right strategy for integrated production. The disconnect they find between management decree and news production practice echoes a common theme of studies presented here.

As soon as the use and adoption of the Internet in households and businesses reached a sizable level, all media organizations felt compelled to establish a significant presence on the Internet. After clumsy attempts to use these new platforms to promote their outlets and make some of its content available online, it became clear that the World Wide Web and the surrounding information and communication technologies would lead to innovative ways to create and circulate content.

Within news organizations, staff had to be redeployed or even hired to take on the new tasks associated with developing a presence on the Web and with feeding the online outlets with content. At first, these tasks were thought to be of a mostly technical nature. Files were to be imported, converted, sorted, and arranged. As the interfaces grew in complexity and the expectations of the users grew in sophistication, the skills required to maintain an online presence outgrew that of mere computer programming and graphic design. Online
content called for specific writing and formatting. A parallel news flow was emerging alongside that of the main newsroom, with its own processes of selection, sometimes its own editorial policy, and its own identity. Although this must all remain compatible and somewhat synchronized with the main newsroom, staff assigned to the management of the online presence was unquestionably dealing with a number of tasks and responsibilities of a near-journalistic nature. In the late 1990s, a new trade was emerging in news organizations, that of online journalists.

Meanwhile, journalists were asked to adopt and use more and more digital technologies in their work. As other chapters in this book demonstrate, they became gradually familiar and skilled at using tools and technologies that, combined with a reshuffling of the workflows, would eventually facilitate the migration of their work to the various digital distribution channels, starting with the Internet.

As a result, a technology-centred work force gradually took on tasks of an editorial and journalistic nature, and journalists were expected to become even more technologically literate—capable of covering a wide span of the multimedia outlets that their organization is to feed. A good number of self-proclaimed web or online journalists considered themselves a “special breed” of journalists (Deuze & Dimoudi, 2002, p. 96).

This concern illustrates a challenging set of issues at the level of human relations, namely those between print journalists and their online counterparts. It is the case that the technological barriers to deploying a fancy website are often simpler and more predictable than the reactions of staff forced into changing their long-standing work habits as well as into redefining their identity.

Despite being in existence for up to a decade, professionals preparing and providing online content (hereafter “online journalists”) are still often not seen as fully-fledged journalists. Traditional journalists tend to be reluctant to consider their online counterparts as peers (Singer, 1998, p. 7). Some of the reluctance might come from tasks performed within online journalism, which is still “first and foremost a desktop job” (Deuze & Paulussen, 2002, p. 241). In the case of newspapers, the online journalists are heavily dependent on the print version of the newspaper and spend more time rewriting and reformating content prepared for the printed version than doing actual reporting.

In Europe, the status of online journalists became an issue only recently. In November 2006, after months of talks between trade unions and the management, the online journalists at U.K. newspaper the Guardian were finally granted
the same salary as the other journalists. The agreement marks a major step toward the consideration of online journalists as professional journalists in a context where an increasing number of newspapers opt for converged newsrooms where online teams are relocated within or just next to the newsroom, eventually merging their web and paper newsrooms into a single entity. Recent examples include the Daily Telegraph or the Financial Times in the United Kingdom and the Volkskrant in the Netherlands.

In Belgium, questions of the upgrading of online journalists’ status and of editorial convergence are a leading concern of the media industry. This chapter describes an investigation of the attempt by Belgium’s newspaper La Libre Belgique to take advantage of a relocation to physically integrate the website team into the newsroom. The question is: Does this cohabitation mean that online journalists have achieved parity with their traditional peers? This ethnographic study, based on observations of the work in the newsrooms and interviews of journalists, aims to identify the changes brought about by this amalgamation. It tries to analyse the relationships between online and paper journalists as regards issues of cooperation, aspirations and mutual representations, in a converged newsroom.

**Media Convergence**

These reorganizations occur within the broader phenomenon known as media convergence, which essentially enables the newsroom to provide information and content in a variety of formats to feed the different media forms and distribution channels and news outlets. According to Zollman (2001), cooperation between two newsrooms could be considered a form of convergence. For example, he argues that a fully integrated newsroom should not happen until “the audiences and revenues of traditional and new media services are more evenly balanced, the interactive media are making solid profits, electronic production systems are able to handle multiple digital media assets across platforms with ease, and when business models have become fully established” (Dube, Mortimer, & Chow, 2004, p. 86). Jenkins (2001, p. 93) defines media convergence as the combination of at least five convergences: technological (digitization), economic (cost savings by horizontal integration), social (adoption of the multimedia channels by the users), cultural (new forms of creativity and transmedia storytelling), and global (international flows of content). We will
later argue based on our field study that media convergence requires even more than these five cumulative features to be fully achieved.

A number of studies have considered the consequences of editorial convergence on newspaper content. In his ethnographic study of three online newsrooms, Bocekowski (2004b) shows how variations in organizational structures, collaborations between print and online journalists, work practices and representations of the users are related to the different ways in which members of the newsroom appropriate interactivity and multimedia. Singer (2004a, p. 838) examined the consequences of convergence on the print journalists, and in particular their resocialization in a converged newsroom. But few studies have contemplated the ensuing changes in the journalist’s daily work and the relations between the two types of journalists. In 2000, Huxford and Duda explored the question and concluded that these relations could be defined as “a collision between cultures.” Based on their ethnographic study of three U.S. newspapers (the New York Times, the Philadelphia Inquirer, and the Morning Call of Allentown, PA), they identified many differences between print and online journalists. Print journalists were found to be “usually middle-aged, graduates of journalism schools, have been working at their newspapers for extensive periods of time,” defining their own work in terms of mediation or gatekeeping. Online journalists, on the other hand, are “usually younger, graduates of many different schools, tend to change their jobs every few years” (Meyers, 2002, p. 25). According to Huxford and Duda (2000), these discrepancies are conditions likely to produce a clash of cultures.

Our research considers this “collision between cultures” in the context of an in-depth reorganization at Belgium’s daily La Libre Belgique.

**Case Study: La Libre Belgique**

Based on observations on the development of the newspaper and its website, this study aims to determine the extent to which online journalists belong in the newsroom.

The prominent and influential Belgian French-speaking daily, La Libre Belgique, owned by the Belgian corporation IPM, provided an opportunity for ethnographic observation when it recently took advantage of a complete relocation to physically integrate the website team into the main newsroom, alongside journalists. By using “methods which capture the social meanings and ordinary activities” (Brewer, 2000, p. 10), this research approach appeared the
most appropriate way to achieve a qualitative insight into the journalists’ daily work and how the attempt to graft online journalists into the newsroom was organized and perceived. As ethnography calls for the combination of multiple techniques of data collection (Cassell & Symon, 2004, p. 313), this case study had three parts. Firstly, Colson conducted an exploratory interview of La Libre Belgique’s editor in chief, which allowed us to prepare the second stage of data collection: nonparticipant observation of work practices which was conducted over three days in 2007.1 We especially paid attention to exchanges and interactions between online and print journalists. Finally, seven open-ended interviews were conducted with actors from the field.2 Based on the collected material, we have analysed the situation with respect to issues of cooperation, aspirations, mutual representations, work flow, and social practices.

Created after World War I, La Libre Belgique faced challenging times with a circulation of less than 50,000 copies in the second quarter of 2007 (to be compared with over 80,000 copies of the popular daily La Dernière Heure, owned by the same group, and over 90,000 copies for the competing French-speaking quality paper Le Soir).3 As with so many newspapers, La Libre Belgique is actively seeking new strategies to enlarge its audience and consolidate its revenues.

The website of La Libre Belgique (www.lalibre.be), after a late start (2001 while competing Le Soir started its website in 1996), is now quite successful and in constant growth with over 460,000 unique visitors for a total of nearly five million page requests in July 2007. On average, about 22,000 regular users visited the website every day in July 2007, which is significantly less than the 39,000 of La Dernière Heure (www.DHnet.be), designed and managed by the same team.

Erratic Convergence

To better understand the development of the collaboration between print and online journalists in La Libre Belgique, and to better analyze our observations, we must consider the successive relocations of the website team within the premises of the newspaper offices. After years of negotiations with journalists on issues related to intellectual property and royalties, La Libre Belgique managers created their website in 2001. The website was welcomed by print journalists who saw it “as an extension of the paper, a good manner of attracting new readers to the newspaper.” That first period seems to be considered as an observation period by La Libre Belgique workers.
A year later, in an attempt to rationalize resources and enhance the sharing of experience, *La Libre Belgique*’s online journalists were moved two floors lower to join the website staff of the popular *La Dernière Heure*. However, print journalists of *La Libre Belgique* were very critical of the work of their colleagues at *La Dernière Heure* and felt detached from their own website. Furthermore, the absence of physical proximity and the resulting lack of personal interaction increased this feeling. The short distance between the newsroom and the online team was enough to limit dramatically exchanges to a few remarks or complaints exchanged via email and telephone.

In January 2007, *La Libre Belgique* and *La Dernière Heure* moved to new premises. Journalists of both newspapers were relocated in a large open space which, although preserving a clear separation between both editorial teams, looks almost like one big newsroom. In order to mark a clear demarcation between the workspaces of journalists of the two newspapers, and in an attempt to refit the online team within the newsroom, thus implicitly endorsing that they were journalists among other journalists, the workstations of the online journalists were located in between, effectively acting as a buffer between journalists of both newspapers. Convergence of workspaces matched the aspirations of online journalists who felt increasingly at odds with the lack of recognition of their status after several years of being immersed into administrative services, alongside sales and advertising departments and away from the newsroom. We call this period the “grafting attempt.” Yet, proximity did not lead to parity, and the graft did not take. In just five months, the planned reconfiguration has evolved in unexpected ways and forced an immediate relocation of the online staff.

Despite their central location in the middle of the newsroom, online journalists were largely ignored. “We feel as if we were invisible,” said one. Our interviews indicate that the older print journalists appeared somewhat fascinated by the new technologies, while the youngest ones, digital natives, educated in a world of technology, showed less interest in the web-related fuss and seemed less interested in convergence. This, if confirmed by more observations, would relativize conclusions by Singer (2004a, p. 850) that journalists with extensive experience would be reluctant to cross the bridge.

From January to May 2007, the online journalists physically cohabited in the newsroom but we saw that they did not actively participate in the newsroom’s life. They were not invited to the editorial meetings, even though it could have improved the quality of the website, its coherence with the paper and the work
flow inside La Libre Belgique. Eventually, they were invited to such a meeting once, but had to turn down the invitation because the time of the meeting was not compatible with their own work (a heavy workload of updating the websites in the morning).

After two months of cohabitation, we could perceive change. Curiosity seemed to be growing among some print journalists who occasionally reached out and made contact with the websites desk. Occasionally, some collaboration seemed to emerge (e.g., a phone call after a press conference from a journalist to alert his online peers). Some journalists frustrated by a shortage of editorial space asked if they could elaborate further on the website. However, tension was still visible when, for example, the editor in chief allowed the online team to prepublish an exclusive on the website.

After only five months of this grafting attempt, management decided to abort it and move the online staff out of the newsroom and into the graphic design unit, thus symbolically and implicitly bringing the online team back to its mere technical facet. Interestingly, no reasons or explanations were provided to the workers. The web staff was simply informed that it would be moved and the rest of the journalists simply noticed their removal. While this removal is seen as a punishment and a step backwards by online journalists, the print journalists have noted their disappearance without emotion. “One morning, a week or two ago, I don’t know, I noticed that there wasn’t anybody at their desk. I don’t know where they are,” explained one print journalist.

When asked, La Libre Belgique management described the decision as carefully weighed and strategic: the online journalists are to work more with the graphic team to improve the quality of the ergonomics and graphics of the website. Furthermore, the radio journalists from Radio Ciel, owned by the same publisher (IPM), will also be located in the same section of the building in what amounts to a new attempt at convergence, this time between web and radio journalists.

The cooperation and collaboration between the newsroom and the website team is now back to square one: limited contacts mostly by email. Later during the second phase of our observations (after the relocation of the online staff outside of the newsroom), we saw a print journalist go upstairs to the online newsroom, but only to complain about how his own article was featured on the website and about an erroneous hyperlink.

Convincing overworked journalists to add to their workload by writing for the website is a challenge. In order to encourage emulation, it was decided that
one journalist will be given the task to act as an intermediary between the print journalists and the website content editors. Every day, he is expected to talk to journalists to determine what they can do on the website and to improve the quality of the information provided. For important stories, they will prepare special reports exclusively for the website. The goal is also to create inside the print newsroom a sense of reactivity and continuous updating so typical of online journalism. The effectiveness of this mediation remains to be seen.

**Findings**

In terms of mutual representations, our observations showed a pattern of “us” versus “them” representation, between online and print journalists, in spite of the physical proximity during the “grafting attempt.” Even if the relationships showed encouraging signs of improvement, print journalists still do not view online journalists as peers, while the latter perceive the attitude of print journalists as haughty and disdainful.

In the course of our observations, we perceived a marked disparity of concerns and aspirations between the two groups. While print journalists worry about their articles, the veracity of information and their sources, online journalists’ immediate attention is absorbed by time-consuming concerns about the website’s pages settings and layout, the renewal of the top stories or the moderation of the forums. “We don’t have time to verify every news wire before putting it on the website,” notes the editor of Lalibre.be. “Our priority is to react quickly. On the Web, if some information is erroneous, it’s easier to rectify.” This study confirms the assumption, supported by the surveys of Deuze and Paulussen (2002, p. 243), that online journalists are less concerned with their roles as gatekeepers and agenda setters than traditional journalists.

The overall situation is largely reminiscent of the one described by Huxford and Duda in 2000: the relations between the print journalists and the newer breed of online journalists could be described as a collision between cultures (defined by Singer as “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices characterizing a social or occupational group”). “For newspaper journalists, it encompasses professional values of expertise, ethics, public service, and autonomy, plus work routines that foster those values” (Singer, 2004a, p. 846).

The attitude of *La Libre Belgique’s* management was also similar to that observed in their study. The decision to integrate the online staff into the newsroom was reportedly taken just a few days before the relocation, and then,
the decision to move it back away from the newsroom was taken only five months later. The managers took the decisions at an institutional level, without preliminary consultation with the society of journalists at the newspaper. They attempted to artificially create convergence with a lack of consideration for the opinion and sensitiveness of the workers, and with no clear long-term vision or strategy outside of mere logistical concerns. Huxford and Duda (2000) insist that in the newsrooms they surveyed, “the online innovation was almost instantly adopted at the institutional level. In all these newspapers, there is also some degree of investment in the creation of independent online editions. While journalistic institutions adopted the concept of online journalism enthusiastically, the journalists were more sceptical” (Meyers, 2002, p. 25).

The journalists did not receive training to help them adapt to the changes. “We don’t mind writing for the website or recording our interviews for podcasting, we don’t have the choice. But, to edit these sorts of material, we need learning and training,” explained one print journalist from *La Libre Belgique*. By the time of this writing, no training had been organized for online and print journalists to help them use a sound recorder, a website, a photo, and video camera and new technologies in general.

Our research indicates that online journalists do not yet belong in the *La Libre Belgique* converged newsroom. The failed grafting attempt sheds light on the process of media convergence within that organization. Based on the five-process typology developed by Jenkins (technological, economical, social, cultural, and global), the Belgian newspaper could be seen as progressing toward achieving media convergence:

*Technological* convergence: In November 2006, the IPM group had adopted an entirely new software platform for content to be used not only for printed publications, but also for the full spectrum of multimedia forms, enabling and encouraging the exchange of content between print and online journalists. By doing so, *La Libre Belgique* and *LaLibre.be* reached technological convergence.

*Economic* convergence: From an economic point of view, the publisher IPM already maximized the convergence between its different outlets: all actors are now grouped in a single location, including a radio station (*Ciel Radio*) as of 2007. IPM has achieved horizontal integration and by doing so, has reduced its operating costs.
Social convergence can only be speculated on in the absence of specific research, but one can assume that visitors of LaLibre.be are not significantly different from the rest of Internet users and that they do, indeed, make their visits to the site just one of several experiences within their media diet.

Cultural convergence as “development of content across multiple channels” (Jenkins, 2001, p. 93) is more evident in La Libre Belgique’s newsroom. Despite a lack of enthusiasm among journalists regarding the Internet as a news medium, print journalists are increasingly aware that their work will be more and more transposed in various formats and distributed by variety of channels. They also understand that the website has a more flexible structure which allows them to overcome the rigid limitations of the newspaper’s editorial space. In the course of our observations, we noticed that journalists occasionally used the website version to add details of an interview that they could not include in the paper version.

Global convergence: Observing the work of the journalists (both print and online) at La Libre Belgique shows clear signs of global convergence as defined by Jenkins. Journalists in the quest for information and content rely heavily on a variety of online content providers including other news media, content sharing platforms, news concentrators and news agencies (now taking full advantage of convergence). When working on an international story, journalists are keen on consulting the websites of leading international media.

Based on Jenkins’ criteria, one can speculate that La Libre Belgique and LaLibre.be are on their way to media convergence. Yet, the failed attempt to graft the online staff in the newsroom leads us to believe that one crucial factor is still hindering the company in this process of convergence. We should therefore consider that a sixth dimension is required to achieve full convergence: editorial convergence, which implies a balanced cooperation between online and print journalists along with a reciprocal positive representation of each other’s work and role. This sixth dimension of convergence is to be seen as a keystone to fully-fledged convergence, even though, in the case examined here, management appeared more concerned with technology and logistics.
Conclusion and Discussion

At each stage of development at La Libre Belgique, management made important decisions with hardly any discussion with the journalists. The successive removals of the website team were imposed on the journalists overnight, without any substantial explanation. Some of the barriers existing between online and print journalists may be rooted in the lack of communication by the management about its multimedia strategy, a deficit in training of print journalists, and the resulting lack of commitment by staff for the new configuration and expectations associated with the unavoidable convergence.

Clearly, online journalists do not yet belong to the newsroom at La Libre Belgique. But was it really the strategy of the IPM group? The editor in chief has informed journalists that they must now write for both the paper and the online versions of the paper. They have to become “multimedia journalists.” He explained that he would like a newsroom producing content which comes in a variety of interoperable forms, i.e., which can be made available on the different distribution channels (website, paper, radio, webTV, mobile phone, etc.). In the future, he speculates, the website team will focus exclusively on the breaking-news feed.

Our observations have led us to establish that Jenkins’ five-process convergence dimensions do not account completely for all the aspects of media convergence. In addition to technological, economic, social, cultural, and global convergences, we found that a form of “editorial convergence” must also be taken into consideration. Short of reciprocal positive representations and constructive cooperation between print and online journalists, a fully integrated newsroom cannot be achieved.

Despite the proximity provided by a shared workspace, the relationships and collaboration between the quality paper’s newsroom (La Libre Belgique) and the popular daily’s newsroom (La Dernière Heure) remain fraught and counter-productive (no cooperation, no common aspirations, no contact “except near the coffee machine”). Although the first attempts to develop synergies with the website failed, subsequent effort to enhance the role of the online staff to unite the different editorial teams should be further investigated. The role and fate of the new “intermediary” who will be made responsible for actively interfacing between the print newsroom and the online team will be of particular interest.
NOTES

1. This observation phase was preparatory to the larger study still in progress.

2. We conducted interviews with the president of La Libre Belgique's Society of Journalists, the editor of the website, one paper journalist, three online journalists, and again with the editor in chief.

3. Stats of newspaper circulation and online audience by CIM (www.cim.be).

4. An association gathering journalists of a particular medium with the primary aim of defending their independence from the company managerial decisions and the quality of their work. Not to be confused with trade unions or professional bodies.