

NUJ submission to the Convergence Think Tank

Seminar One: Why does convergence matter?

Introduction

The National Union of Journalists is the UK's largest journalists' organisation. Its 37,000 members work in all media, including those working online as well as in traditional media; our "new media" sector is the fastest growing in the union. Our members work to a Code of Conduct that obliges them to adhere to the highest possible professional standards.

The NUJ has been, since its formation 100 years ago, committed to promoting the freedom of the press and the development of media that allow our members the maximum opportunity to provide the public with the highest standard of news and information. With each new wave of technological innovation we have worked to safeguard the interests not just of our members but of their ability to inform readers, viewers and listeners. The NUJ wholeheartedly embraces the digital future, which offers fantastic opportunities to journalists, as to everybody else, and we want to ensure that the opportunities are taken to enhance both the quality of the service we can provide and the ability of citizens/consumers to locate and use the services they want.

We are pleased, therefore, to have the chance to take part in the Convergence Think Tank process, and believe we have relevant information to put into what is sometimes a difficult and confusing debate.

Last December we released a thorough and comprehensive report into the effect on journalists' work of the current process of digital integration, which is one element of convergence. This was based on a survey of members working in dozens of offices around the country. In his introduction to the report our General Secretary Jeremy Dear wrote:

"This report demonstrates unequivocally that journalists don't reject technological change or seek to hold back the tide. But we do seek to shape the future, to serve not the media corporations but the readers and viewers. The real threat to quality comes not from technology, not from new media, not even from 'citizen journalism', but from those who treat information and news as nothing more than a commodity, and journalists as the servants of corporate interests, not the public."

Why is the convergence debate important?

Digital convergence can have a major impact on the lives of citizens/consumers, who are rapidly gaining access to more and more

sources of information and entertainment. One priority must be to ensure universal access to broadband internet and digital broadcasting by the whole population.

But the NUJ's concern is naturally with journalism. We see the convergence debate as particularly significant because policy decisions in this field will impact on the ability of UK citizens to access local, regional, national and international news from reliable, impartial and high quality sources.

The NUJ believes that the following specific areas must be addressed by the Convergence Think Tank as part of its work.

Quality news

It is commonly pointed out that with a proliferation of sources readers will need to know where to go for high quality journalism they can rely on, with professional editing to act as gatekeepers, filtering and interpreting that information. The publishers' solution has been to establish themselves as "brands" to which readers will turn for the news they want. Those that have been doing so for a decade now, such as the Guardian and the BBC, have achieved conspicuous success and others are now following.

Those that are successful commercially are no doubt secure, but the union has concerns about the future of the BBC's sites. The BBC's decision under John Birt to invest heavily in the internet was far seeing and has been a triumph. The corporation retains the highest reputation around the world, thanks now to the website as much as to its broadcasting, and the finances must be secure to continue to develop it; the NUJ regards the BBC Trust's recent decision to carry advertising on bbc.com as a retrograde step.

The development of the BBC's integrated output as a public service must be a central element in planning and legislating for the media in the digital future. The government should resist lobbying from its commercial competitors to weaken the public service obligations of both the BBC and the principle commercial broadcasters.

It should be policy to assist the commercial broadcasters to maintain their public service element. The NUJ has put forward to Ofcom a proposal to attach such obligations to the provision of free access to the digital terrestrial spectrum. One of our concerns is that ITV must retain the responsibility and ability to maintain a high standard of regional news and programme making.

The argument that an integrated digital world can no longer bear the notion of public service is a dubious one: the main reason being this very need to ensure that citizens/consumers can continue to receive material of high quality – something the market, left to its own devices, cannot ensure.

The most remarkable feature of the expansion of TV channels over the last ten years has been not the decline but the resilience of audience share and

reach among the PSB channels, the fact that with hundreds of channels, BBC television still has an audience reach of 84.4%.^{*1}

It is vital to give serious and measured consideration to the prophecies of technophiles, backed by commercial interests, with their claims that new technologies must mean the demise of the standards of the old. The dotcom bubble of 1998-2001 – the hype over what we suppose should now be called Web 1.0 – is proof of that. The more interactive Web 2.0 offers even greater change and must be all the more carefully considered.

One worry about the increased blurring of the distinction between terrestrial and online TV broadcasting is the effect of the lack of regulation on the latter.

“The cult of the amateur”

While the NUJ welcomes the access to online media afforded by Web 2.0, we do have concerns about the effect on standards of unlimited and unedited contributions. Publishers welcome the availability of “user-generated content” – or “citizen journalism” as it is known in the context of news – principally because it comes free of charge. Some commentators like to dress it up as a great advance in democracy and pronounce that professionally produced news will become a thing of the past. However, Peter Horrocks, head of the multimedia news department within BBC News, recently talked about the fact that only one per cent of the audience engage with the BBC in any way, whether through traditional audience feedback or via text, phone or email and that people should remember that the BBC is for everyone, not just the participative 1%.^{*2}

The phrase “cult of the amateur” is the title of a book by a critical commentator, Andrew Keen, that serves as a useful antidote to some of the hype about Web 2.0. The NUJ report “Shaping the Future” said:

“The media pages are crammed with starry-eyed commentators who talk not just of ‘new’ media but of a ‘new’ journalism, with the open access of the internet effectively allowing anybody to be a journalist. Yes the internet is a brilliant medium for everyone, but not, the NUJ says, at the expense of decent professional journalism.”

The NUJ has drawn up guidelines for the use of user generated content by news media. It is of course up to the industry to follow such guidelines and ensure that everything that is published meets professional standards, but there are further questions here about the regulation of the internet: such as questions of legal liability for the publication of questionable material and requirements to remove it. The union has for instance been involved in talks with ministers about ultra right-wing websites likely to incite violence against our members, and there are other areas of concern. However, the NUJ is

¹ BBC Annual report 2007

² http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2008/01/value_of_citizen_journalism.html

delighted with the blogging phenomenon, and is recruiting bloggers to its ranks, but blogging does not replace news, and without reliable news there can be no well-informed comment. The union is debating these questions, which are sometimes difficult, and is keen that the whole industry should do so.

Media ownership

Policies should be discussed to ensure the plurality and diversity of ownership of new media. Within the UK there have for decades been particular provisions to restrict the ownership and control of news and broadcast media, recognising their civic and social importance. The rationale for these laws, which, though weakened, have always been retained, remain valid, if not of even greater importance in the currently uncertain climate.

Now we no longer have simply publishing companies, who at least have commitments to publishing *per se*, but telecom companies, internet service providers and software and search engine companies. These have immense worldwide power, controlling the flow of almost unlimited information. They can collaborate with governments to inflict censorship on whole nations. They can determine the order in which information is accessible to billions of people. The UK government must take steps to ensure plurality of media ownership is maintained to ensure that just a few individuals or organisations do not dominate the news sources used by UK citizens.

Key policy implications

In summary, the NUJ's initial policy concerns over convergence are these:

- The universal provision of access to broadband internet and digital broadcasting.
- The retention of public service obligations on licensed broadcasters and security of investment in the BBC and its websites.
- The maximising of plurality in ownership and control of media outlets.
- A shift in Government policy from a market based approach to regulation, to an integrated process using new technology and services to ensure that public policy objectives such as public service broadcasting and digital literacy can be achieved.

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